



Le Dieu Tran

**Trust in an online hospitality network:
An interpretive study of The CouchSurfing Project**

Supervisor: Raivo Ruusalepp

Master thesis
International Master in Digital Library Learning
2009

DECLARATION

“I certify that all material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been identified and that no material is included for which a degree has previously been conferred upon me”

.....(signature of candidate)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Raivo Ruusalepp. Your knack for looking at the “big picture” has been immensely helpful in guiding the process of writing this thesis. I appreciate the time you have taken out of your busy schedule to offer your astute advice, knowledge and encouragement. *Tänan väga.*

To the individuals who I’ve interviewed for this thesis, thank you for your keen participation and sharing your thoughts with me. To the CouchSurfers, I admire your magnanimity and faith in the unknown.

To Katherine Howard, Sirje Virkus, Christina Hough and Jacqueline Lee, thank you for reading through my drafts and for your insightful comments.

To my professors and lecturers at Oslo University College, Parma University and Tallinn University as well as the DILL scholars and visiting professors, I thank you for imparting your expertise and enthusiasm for the profession with us. Special thanks to Sirje Virkus and Aira Lepik at Tallinn University, your dedication to fostering student excellence both academically and professionally are evident and greatly appreciated.

To my fellow DILLers, you have made these past two years a memorable experience. The laughter, challenges and camaraderie, I will certainly remember. I have learned a lot from each of you and hope that our paths will cross at some point in the future.

Lastly, to my family, your encouragement and infallible support have carried me through my studies abroad these past two years, I am truly grateful.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this interpretive study is to acquire a deeper understanding of the concept of interpersonal trust in an online community, namely, The CouchSurfing Project. CouchSurfing is an online hospitality network whose purpose is to connect travellers and local hosts offering free accommodations and more importantly, a chance for cultural exchange. CouchSurfers complete online profiles that allow other members to search for and make requests for accommodations based on information on these profiles.

In the discombobulated virtual environment, online personas might not reflect reality. Issues of trust and the perceived risks associated with CouchSurfing were explored. The concepts of trust and risk share a close relationship; in order to build trust, it is necessary to minimise the perceived risks.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 CouchSurfing members and 6 non-members. Non-members were included in this study in order to obtain a perspective that would be different from those who already prescribe to the CouchSurfing philosophy that is based on the concept of “paying it forward.”

Both members and non-members acknowledged that there are risks to participating in CouchSurfing. However, strategies such as control, comparison between risks, possession of self-confidence and scapegoating seem to help mitigate perceived risks. Moreover, this study suggests that the community’s social network acts as an informal method of social control to help foster and sustain trust amongst its members. Thus, it is the human relationships, rather than technologies that are important in nurturing trust.

Keywords: trust, risk, online hospitality network, CouchSurfing, social network, online trust

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	vii
List of Tables.....	vii
List of Abbreviations.....	vii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	2
1.1 Motivations.....	2
1.2 The CouchSurfing Project.....	4
1.2.1 CouchSurfing Profiles.....	5
1.2.2 Trust in the CouchSurfing Community.....	8
1.2.3 Rationale for Studying CouchSurfing.....	9
1.3 Statement of the Problem.....	10
1.4 Research Questions.....	11
1.5 Methodology.....	11
1.6 Limitations.....	12
1.7 Significance.....	12
1.8 Conclusion.....	13
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	15
2.1 Definitions of Trust.....	16
2.1.1 The Stages of Trust.....	18
2.2 Trust in the Online Environment.....	19
2.2.1 Formation of Interpersonal Trust (offline and online).....	20
2.2.2 Obstacles to Online Trust Formation.....	22
2.2.3 Mechanisms to Help Establish Online Trust.....	26
2.3 Perceived Risks.....	30
2.4.1 Risk Management Strategies.....	31
2.4 Existing Research on Trust and Online Hospitality Networks.....	32
2.5 Conclusion.....	35
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN.....	37
3.1 Methodology.....	37
3.2 Sampling.....	39
3.2.1 Sampling Techniques.....	40
3.3 Method of Data Collection.....	41
3.3.1 Online Synchronous Interviews.....	41
3.3.2 Member and Non-Member Interview Procedures.....	43
3.4 Interview Questions.....	43
3.5 Ethical Considerations.....	45
3.6 Data Analysis.....	46
3.6.1 Data Reduction.....	47

3.6.2 Data Display	50
3.6.3 Conclusions: drawing/verifying	50
3.7 Reflections on Research Design	51
3.8 Conclusion	52
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	55
4.1 Demographic Information of Respondents	56
4.2 Reasons for Joining CouchSurfing	57
4.3 Type of Information Relied Upon in Decision-Making Process	58
4.3.1 Search/Request Acceptance Process	59
4.3.2 References	64
4.3.3 Vouched and Verified Statuses	67
4.4 General Opinions Regarding Trust in the Online Environment	69
4.4.1 Extent of Online Trust	69
4.4.2 Online Trust Versus Offline Trust	72
4.4.3 Conditions for Online Trust to Occur	74
4.5 Perceptions of Risk	75
4.6 Strategies for Managing Perceived Risks	77
4.6.1 Control as Risk Mitigator	77
4.6.2 Comparison as Risk Mitigator	79
4.6.3 Self-Confidence as Risk Mitigator	79
4.6.4 Role of Social Network as Risk Mitigator	80
4.7 Interest Amongst Non-Members to Join CouchSurfing	81
4.8 Discussion	82
4.8.1 CouchSurfing Experiences	83
4.8.2 Type of Information Relied Upon in Decision-Making Process	83
4.8.3 General Opinions Regarding Trust in the Online Environment	86
4.8.4 Perceptions of Risk	89
4.8.5 Strategies for Managing Perceived Risks	90
4.8.6 Interest Amongst Non-Members to Join CouchSurfing	91
4.9 Conclusion	92
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS	94
5.1 Conclusions to the Research Questions	95
5.2 Implications of Research	97
5.3 Reflections on Research	99
5.4 Future Research Ideas	100
REFERENCES	103
APPENDIX 1: COUCHSURFING (member) INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	111
APPENDIX 2: COUCHSURFING (non-member) TASK & INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ...	113

List of Figures

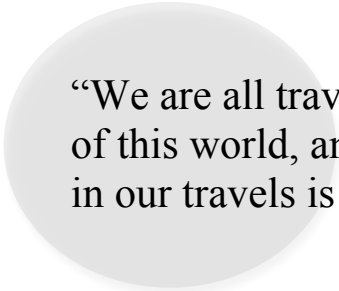
Figure 1: Example of a CouchSurfing profile (cont'd on p. 7)	6
Figure 2: Example of a CouchSurfing profile (cont'd from p. 6)	7
Figure 3: Trust production process (Bailey et al., 2001)	20
Figure 4: Components of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994)	46
Figure 5: Screenshot of TAMS Analyzer – workspace & examples of codes created	47
Figure 6: Codes and code sets	49
Figure 7: Example of data display (report generated by TAMS Analyzer)	50
Figure 8: The process of CouchSurfing - SEARCHING and REQUESTING	60
Figure 9: The process of CouchSurfing - COMMUNICATING	61
Figure 10: The process of CouchSurfing - MEETING	61
Figure 11: The process of CouchSurfing - REFERENCING	62

List of Tables

Table 1: Research Themes and Corresponding Code Sets	48
Table 2: Age and Gender of Non-Member Group	56
Table 3: Age, Gender and CouchSurfing Membership of Member Group	56
Table 4: Perceptions of Risk by CouchSurfing Members and Non-Members	76
Table 5: Nissenbaum's Conditions for Trust Applied to CouchSurfing	88

List of Abbreviations

B&B = Bed and Breakfast	JSTOR = Journal Storage (electronic journals database)
B2C = Business to Consumer	MSN Messenger = Microsoft Network Messenger (name of instant messaging client by Microsoft)
C2C = Consumer to Consumer	P2P = Peer-to-Peer
CMC = Computer-Mediated Communication	SIP = Social Information Processing
CS = CouchSurfing or CouchSurfer	TAMS Analyzer = Text Analysis Markup System Analyzer
EBSCO = Elton B Stevens Company (electronic journals database)	
IM = Instant Messaging	



“We are all travelers in the wilderness of this world, and the best we can find in our travels is an honest friend.”

- Robert Louis Stevenson

Chapter 1:

INTRODUCTION

Couchsurfing is bringing us together in a common vision where travel is redefined to mean a lot more than a vacation, or sightseeing. It's bridging cultures, creating new friendships, and encouraging the practice of giving and sharing... I believe Couchsurfing.com can truly help spread good in the world. All it takes is a host, a guest, and of course, a couch. And it will happen, one couch at a time...

~Sebastien Le Tuan, Co-Founder, CouchSurfing.com

1.1 Motivations

Someone once described me as having “itchy travelling feet.” Having lived abroad in four countries within the past four years, I would say that this is a pretty apt description. However, flitting from one tourist site to the next would not be my ideal way to travel. Although I *have* been a “typical tourist” at different points in time, being able to learn about new cultures, languages (with varying degrees of success) and meeting local people (although not always the easiest) are some things that I have appreciated most about living abroad. If it is any indication, the 1 000 000 plus members around the world involved with The CouchSurfing Project (www.CouchSurfing.com) leads me to believe that there are plenty of people out there who prefer not to do the typical tourist thing as well.

What is The CouchSurfing Project? In brief, it is an online hospitality network with the purpose of connecting travellers and local hosts offering a place to stay for free and a chance for cultural exchange. When an individual becomes a member of the network, the user creates an online profile containing information about him/herself. These profiles reside in a database so that members can search and contact each other primarily to make accommodation requests. In my opinion, CouchSurfing is an intriguing concept. It seems like a great way to become acquainted with local people while travelling. Its motto, “Participate in Creating a

Better World, One Couch At A Time” adheres to the idea that being involved with CouchSurfing will “raise collective consciousness, spread tolerance, and facilitate cultural understanding" (The CouchSurfing Project, n.d.).

I often wonder, what compels people to join CouchSurfing? How do CouchSurfers know whom they can trust by just looking at another member’s profile on CouchSurfing.com? Do they have a natural propensity to trust strangers? Do they perceive it as a risky activity? If so, how are these risks managed? Although only some of these questions are addressed in this thesis, the impetus behind this project was to explore how these trust decisions are made and on what basis as well as the perceptions and management of risks.

This introductory chapter first provides an overview of The CouchSurfing Project and why it was selected to be the object of study for this thesis. The next sections of this chapter comprise of the statement of the problem, research questions and a brief overview of the methodology. Finally, this chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations and significance of this study.

The second chapter looks at literature that has examined interpersonal trust as well as perceived risks in the online environment in order to provide context. The chapter ends with an overview of research that has been conducted to date, on the topic of trust in online hospitality networks in order to identify gaps in the literature.

Chapter 3 includes an overview of the methodology, data collection techniques, sampling and data analysis methods that have been used in this study. Justification for the methodological decisions concerning the chosen epistemology, methods, and sampling techniques is discussed throughout the chapter.

Chapter 4 comprises of the results from the empirical research. Themes associated with the research questions of this study are explored and related to existing literature in the Discussion. Finally, conclusions are drawn in Chapter 5, followed by the implications of the findings, reflections on the research as well as recommendations for future work.

1.2 The CouchSurfing Project

As stated above, The CouchSurfing Project is an online hospitality network with the purpose of connecting travellers (“surfers”) seeking free accommodation with hosts offering a “couch” (i.e. a place to stay for a night or more) in various places around the world. As of June 28th, 2009, there are 1 212 162 CouchSurfers from 232 countries worldwide (The CouchSurfing Project, 2009). Although free accommodation amongst its members is a product of this service, the philosophy behind its mission is to spread tolerance at a grassroots level via cultural exchange. Members who use the service with the sole purpose of obtaining a free place to stay are looked down upon as “freeloaders”.

CouchSurfing was started in the United States in 2003 but was formally launched in 2004. The website as it appears now, is version 2.0 of the original website after most of the data in the CouchSurfing database was lost in 2006. According to the CouchSurfing website, the idea was conceived after a weekend trip to Iceland taken by co-founder, Casey Fenton. Fenton had bought cheap tickets for a flight from Boston to Iceland but had no place to stay. Thus, he decided to send a personalized email to 1500 students at the University of Iceland to see if anyone would be willing to host him for a few days. Within a single day, he received 50-100 offers and thus, the idea for The CouchSurfing Project was born.

The premise of CouchSurfing is that members of the community offer the possibility of providing accommodations to fellow travelling CouchSurfers as a way for travellers to meet local people; hence, a unique form of cultural exchange. However, the offer of a place to stay is not mandatory in order to become a member. Thus, the hospitality exchange is reciprocal in the sense that this gift of goodwill will possibly be repaid at some undefined point in the future for those currently unable to host. Accordingly, some members offer to meet up for coffee or give tours of their city if they are momentarily unable to offer accommodations.

Furthermore, the ideals of CouchSurfing seem to be based upon the notion of “paying it forward”, a concept popularized by Catherine Ryan Hyde’s novel, *Pay it Forward*, which has spawned a Warner Brothers movie by the same name as well as a social movement. This phrase could be described as “the concept of asking that a good turn be repaid by having it done to others instead” (“Pay it forward,” 2009, para. 1). Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling*

Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community, believes that these non-immediate reciprocal transactions foster the creation of trust (Putnam, 2000).

In order to find potential hosts, surfers look through a database of profiles of CouchSurfing members living in destinations that they will be visiting and make requests for accommodations primarily based on the information provided in the profiles. If a host consents, then arrangements would be made between the two parties. Then at the appointed date, time and place, the two parties meet at the travel destination (i.e. host's city). After the experience, the two parties provide references for one another about their experiences and opinions of each other (this last step is optional). A graphical depiction of the procedures involved in a typical CouchSurfing experience can be found in Fig. 8 to Fig. 11 in Chapter 4: Research Results and Discussion, which further explores the process of searching for a host and accepting a hosting request.

1.2.1 CouchSurfing Profiles

The CouchSurfing profiles are intended as an online self-representation of each member since the way for CouchSurfers to learn about one another is primarily from their online profiles. Moreover, it is up to the individual member to decide on the amount of information to include in their profile. However, CouchSurfing encourages its members to fill in as much detail as possible so that there is sufficient information for members to decide whether or not to stay with/host the other member. In fact, one of the privacy settings that a user can enable is that only members with a complete profile can contact that user.

Members may choose to offer information such as gender, occupation, languages spoken, a personal description, photos, list of friends and their level of friendship with the user, interests, personal philosophy, nature of accommodations to be offered, locations travelled, whether or not they have been vouched by a fellow CouchSurfer and/or verified and so on. For an example of a CouchSurfing profile, please refer to Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, which features the profile of co-founder, Casey Fenton.

CouchSurfing Profile of Co-Founder Casey Fenton

Casey Fenton
 Current Mission: "To participate in CS2, and to show you that the world is smaller than you think!"

Personal Designations
 95

Community Designations


United States
 California
 San Francisco
 Lat: 37.775, Lon: -122.41833
 Show nearby Couches (100 K)



General Information

CS title **Founder**

Casey Fenton is a **CS Admin**

Casey Fenton is a **CS Nomadic Ambassador!**

CS Collective Participant : BaseCamp!

Casey Fenton has been vouched for

VERIFIED MEMBER (3) [more info](#)

Couch available Traveling at the moment

CouchSurf requests 64%
replied to

last login 26 hrs ago
 Vienna, Vienna, Austria ...

member since March 2nd, 1978

profile views 216419

age 31

gender Male

membername CASEY

occupation Adventurer Extraordinaire & Social Networker

education University of Life

grew up in White Mountains of Maine and New Hampshire

ethnicity Irish and such

[My Website](#)

[Direct Profile URL](#)

How do I know Casey Fenton (show)

Languages

English (United States) ^{Expert}

French ^{Beginner}

Spanish ^{Beginner}

Portuguese (Brazil) ^{Beginner}

English (New Zealand) ^{Beginner}

Send Message ++ Contact List ++ Make Note Print

This is an interesting profile!



On a mountain in Alaska
[View all 86 photos](#)

Personal Description
 A person doing person things.

How I Participate in CS
 I helped create CS and I am proud to have helped create CS2 and the project beyond. The people I work with in this organization are truly amazing to me. I am thankful to be working with all of you who make this dream a reality!

CouchSurfing Experience
 South America, Africa, Europe, North America, Asia, Oceania etc.

Interests
 Anything at least once.

Philosophy
 Life is a string of experiences. I believe that we should strive for frequent, intense and diverse experiences. In the end, this is all we will have.

Figure 1: Example of a CouchSurfing profile (cont'd on p. 7)

CouchSurfing Profile of Co-Founder Casey Fenton

Groups I Belong To

Verification Processing Team <small>11:458</small>	Ambassadors Private <small>1623:13452</small>
CSC Nelson NZ, 2006-2007 - Public <small>269:466</small> <small>Why: I can't wait for the CSC-NZ</small> <small>Active in 17 more groups.</small> <small>Show them all</small>	Vegetarians 3882:2775

Couch Information

No couch currently available for surfing.

We can not host anyone at the moment because I am traveling for the next couple months.

Friends (522)

Map of friends

<div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> DANII <small>30, Female</small> <small>Toronto, Ontario</small> <small>Canada</small> <small>Friends since August</small> <small>2005</small> <small>"We've shared many a good time in some of the best cities in the world" - BRC, SF, Toront, MTL."</small> <small>Friendship Type: 6 - Close Friend</small> <small>I vouched for Casey Fenton</small> <small>14 21 7</small> </div>	<div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> COSMIC GIRL <small>33, Several people</small> <small>Montreal, Quebec</small> <small>Canada</small> <small>Friends since December 2004</small> <small>"Casey and I are the living proof that CS is more than a couch! He's the kind of friend that lets me put M&Ms in his nose and ears and dares to have mud fights!"</small> <small>Friendship Type: 5 - Good Friend</small> <small>I vouched for Casey Fenton</small> <small>11</small> </div>
<div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> Daniel Haffer <small>31, Male</small> <small>Menlo Park, California</small> <small>United States</small> <small>Friends since 1997</small> <small>"Casey is a former co-worker. Brilliant guy and a kindred spirit. Two thumbs up!"</small> <small>11</small> </div>	<div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> Jim Stone <small>31, Male</small> <small>San Francisco, California</small> <small>United States</small> <small>Friends since April 2004</small> <small>"Finally met up with Casey in Hawaii...then again a few months later underground in New Mexico...and then in Montreal...San Francisco...New Zealand...Copperopolis... where next, my friend?"</small> <small>Friendship Type: 7 - Best Friend</small> <small>I vouched for Casey Fenton</small> <small>30+ 30+ 30+</small> </div>
<div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> Heather O'Brien <small>35, Female</small> <small>San Francisco.</small> </div>	<div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> Camtaastic <small>33, Male</small> <small>San Francisco.</small> </div>

Music, Movies, Books

I have a long list of over 100 books I need to read sometime soon. If you have a book to add to the list, let me know! Besides books, I also love beats and bleeps.

Types of People I enjoy

"...the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes 'Awww!'" Those are the people I enjoy.

Teach, Learn, Share

I can teach you about social networking in the context of CS. That is what I do every day of my life. I would like to learn about how to get to the South and North Poles.

One Amazing Thing I've Seen or Done

In Egypt I climbed the great pyramid at 4am, stood on top and surveyed the desert.

Opinion on the CouchSurfing.org Project

I love all of these wonderful people!

Locations Traveled

TRAVELED: Austria, Barbados, Brazil, Canada, Egypt, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Mexico, Netherlands, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom, United States
LIVED: Canada, New Zealand, United States
WANTS TO GO: Australia, Belize, Canada, Chile, Greenland, Iceland, India, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, Thailand
IS GOING TO: United States

References

From ADVENTUROUS7
London, United Kingdom
Jun 14
Positive
 Cassey is a very warm person with a positive inclusive spirit. Felt not only from what he says but also from the vibrations which he radiates, and seen in his eyes(the window to the soul). Always ready for service-Responds every time despite whatever he is doing. Keep it going Casey.

From Paolo Beltrame
Rome, Italy
Jun 13
Positive
 Casey? Of course he don't need a reference! But met him was really a big pleasure, especially feel how many energy and passion he put inside this project called Couch Surfing.

Figure 2: Example of a CouchSurfing profile (cont'd from p. 6)

1.2.2 Trust in the CouchSurfing Community

Trust is an important aspect of participating in the CouchSurfing community. The concept of “initial trust” – “the trust one party has to another before they engage in the first trust behavior” (Xu & Kim, 2003, p. 1503) – could be applied to the CouchSurfing context because for the most part, each request that a member makes or receives is likely from a stranger in the network. Indeed, there are mature trust relationships that have formed over time in the community, for example, friendships that have resulted from successful CouchSurfing experiences. But arguably, this type of trust is different from initial trust, which is based on the idea that both parties do not personally know one another at the beginning. A more in-depth exploration of the notion of trust (i.e. how scholars have defined the term, its developmental stages, and its definition in the online context) is found in Chapter 2: Literature Review.

To help build trust, there are several safety measures that the organization has put into place online. For example, all correspondence between members via the CouchSurfing internal messaging system is recorded and kept in case it needs to be referred to in the event of a safety related incident.

Secondly, the references system allows members to leave positive/negative/neutral references on each other’s profiles. Members are not able to remove references from their own profiles so that there is a record of how a particular member is perceived by others.

As well, like other social networking communities such as Facebook or MySpace, CouchSurfers can show their connections with other CouchSurfers by “friending” one another. In CouchSurfing, when members add a friend to their network, they are asked to specify their level of friendship with the other person, which appears on the profiles. There is a choice of seven levels of friendship: Haven’t met yet, Acquaintance, CouchSurfing Friend, Friend, Good Friend, Close Friend, and Best Friend. Also, members are asked to indicate their “Trust Degree” for the other person (i.e. I don’t know this person well enough to decide, I don’t trust this person, I trust this person somewhat, I generally trust this person, I highly trust this person, I would trust this person with my life), however, this information does not appear on the profiles.

Finally, the vouching and verification systems are two other trust building mechanisms found in CouchSurfing. In order to receive the status of a “vouched” member, a member has to be vouched by at least three other members who themselves have already been vouched, thus creating a circle of trust. To become a “verified” member, this involves a \$25 donation to the organization via a credit card payment so that one’s real name and address can be verified with a credit card company. Subsequently, a postcard with a verification code is sent to the individual, which is then entered into the CouchSurfing website in order to complete the verification process.

1.2.3 Rationale for Studying CouchSurfing

The impetus behind selecting CouchSurfing as the object of study for this thesis project is due to the presence of two interesting phenomena: the relationship that may or may not be considered as trust that is initially formed between two virtual identities who may or may not reflect who the people are in reality and secondly, the online-offline relationship is worthy of note, where trust (or something that resembles it) is initially formed in the online environment and then transferred into the real world.

There are other examples that follow this model, such as dating services (e.g. www.match.com, www.plentyoffish.com), home swaps (e.g. www.homelink.org, www.homeexchange.com), ride share/carpooling programs (e.g. www.hitchhikers.org, www.needaride.com.au), and services offering manual labour in exchange for a place to stay (e.g. <http://www.woof.org/>, <http://www.helpx.net/>) that are facilitated by the Internet. Although these websites serve different purposes, a commonality is that there may be a certain degree of perceived risk and uncertainty involved because most of the time, the transactions are initiated amongst strangers online, where identity is difficult to verify.

Aside from CouchSurfing, other online hospitality networks currently in operation include: Hospitality Club (www.hospitalityclub.org; founded in 2000, the second largest in the world), Global Freeloaders (www.globalfreeloaders.com; founded in 2001), Warm Showers (www.warmshowers.org; founded in 2005), and BeWelcome (www.bewelcome.org; founded in 2007). CouchSurfing was selected for this study because it is currently the largest and perhaps the most popular hospitality network in the world.

However, these types of hospitality exchange networks are not a new phenomenon. Prior to the existence of the Internet, organizations such as Servas International (which has existed since 1949 and has been recognized by the United Nations) and Pasporta Servo (a hospitality network dating from 1974, just for Esperanto speakers) have been around. In fact, the notion of offering hospitality to strangers was a very important practice found in ancient Greek culture, known as *xenia*, meaning “hospitality” or “guest-friendship” (Budin, 2004). Thus, this concept is not a novel idea. However, the uniqueness of services such as CouchSurfing and Hospitality Club is that a computer-mediated environment is facilitating the exchange between traveller and host.

These computer-mediated exchanges come with several challenges, which are explored in Chapter 2: Literature Review. Nevertheless, some of the major concerns described in the computer-mediated communication (CMC) literature are the lack of verifiable personal identity and the nature of “truth” in a disembodied environment such as the Internet (Turkle, 1995; Hine, 2000).

Although online information provides cues regarding the nature of a particular person, how is one to know if the information provided on a profile is presented truthfully? As a CouchSurfer sifts through the profiles to select a potential host or as a host scrutinizes the profile of a surfer who has just made a request for accommodations, what makes them trust someone over another? What are the risks involved? Can these risks be managed by technology? Does the online environment provide sufficient tools to manage these risks?

1.3 Statement of the Problem

In an online environment where the true identity of the trustee is difficult to verify, it is much more difficult to build trust than in a face-to-face situation where one can rely upon visual cues (Riegelsberger, Sasse & McCarthy, 2003). Depending upon the type of community, true identity might not even matter, for example in online gaming or virtual worlds such as Second Life. However, in a community such as CouchSurfing, the trust relationship that is initially formed online is then transformed into the offline environment. Hence, there is arguably a greater concern for true identity because virtual identities may not reflect reality.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to acquire a deeper understanding of the concept of interpersonal trust in an online community. In order to achieve this objective, this study aims to identify, describe and analyse factors leading to trust building in the CouchSurfing community, explore the perceived risks involved in engaging in CouchSurfing and strategies used by members to help manage these risks.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions provide the focus and direction for the research:

1. What type of profile information do CouchSurfers use to decide whom they can trust?
2. To what extent do people trust the information provided on the online CouchSurfing profiles?
3. What are the perceived risks of CouchSurfing?
4. What kind of strategies, if any, do CouchSurfers use in order to mitigate risks?

The rationale behind questions 1 and 2 is to gain a sense of the type of information that CouchSurfers rely upon in their decision-making process as they interact with others online. Since some theorists believe that it is only in risky situations that trust is required (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Kramer, 1999; Luhmann, 1998), questions 3 and 4 are included to examine the perceived risks associated with CouchSurfing and if the CouchSurfing online service plays a role in mitigating these risks.

1.5 Methodology

In brief, this qualitative study is based upon an interpretivist approach. The data collection method consists of semi-structured interviews conducted via synchronous chat clients such as Skype and MSN Messenger with both non-members (6 in total) and members (6 in total) of the CouchSurfing community. The process of data analysis consists of coding the interviews and grouping the codes into four themes that correspond with the four research questions. A more detailed discussion of the methodology can be found in Chapter 3: Research Design.

1.6 Limitations

There are a few limitations that should be outlined in order to have a clearer idea of the scope of this study. Firstly, CouchSurfing is the only online hospitality network that has been studied. Thus, the findings are accordingly not easily generalisable to other similar services or online social networking services. However, the findings may be applicable to these online environments.

Secondly, CouchSurfing is an international service with members from over 200 countries but only 6 people from three countries comprise the interviewed CouchSurfing member group. Furthermore, the role and/or significance of cultural background or personal preferences to trust building and networking have not been explored.

Thirdly, the size of the sample of people interviewed is a small proportion of the overall CouchSurfing population of over one million. Thus, the findings are not representative of the entire population. However, this is a qualitative study and not a quantitative study, so the sample size is less crucial. Furthermore, the sample that was obtained consists of members of varying age ranges and years of experience.

Lastly, language is perhaps another limitation since the membership of CouchSurfing is very international. However, only English-speaking members have been interviewed, although, most of the interviewed members speak at least one other language.

1.7 Significance

Trust is fundamental to the success of networked societies and social institutions such as governments, economic systems, and educational institutions. The absence of trust would allow an environment of scepticism and self-interest to flourish, which incidentally is antithesis of the CouchSurfing philosophy. During our daily transactions online, we are faced with decisions of trust. Can we trust the website or the individual on the other end when we enter our credit card to buy a book, chat with a stranger, or download a peer-to-peer file?

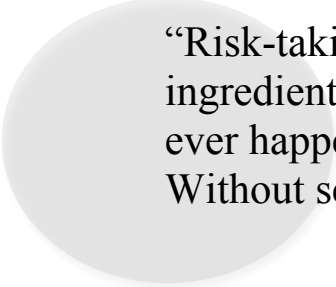
Therefore, the findings of this thesis although not easily generalisable, are applicable to other virtual environments, including online services related to information science (e.g. digital libraries, archives, or other memory institutions). Fundamentally, in order to cooperate

effectively and to create an environment that promotes the exchange of resources and ideas, trust is essential. Thus, it would be important to investigate the basis upon which people make their decisions of trust in the online environment.

Lastly, a review of the literature seems to indicate that a study that examines the issue of trust in the CouchSurfing community from the perspectives of both member and non-member has not been done before. Furthermore, currently there does not seem to be a large body of qualitative research on the topic of trust and CouchSurfing. Chapter 2: Literature Review goes into greater detail about the studies associated with CouchSurfing and trust that have been done.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the groundwork for this thesis report. First, the motivations for this study were outlined. Next, an overview of The CouchSurfing Project was given in order to provide a greater understanding of the community. Finally, the statement of the problem, research questions, methodology, limitations and significance of the study were described. With this background information, this thesis report can proceed to the following chapter, which provides a review of literature pertinent to the topic of this study.



“Risk-taking, trust, and serendipity are key ingredients of joy. Without risk, nothing new ever happens. Without trust, fear creeps in. Without serendipity, there are no surprises.”

- Rita Golden Gelman

Chapter 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides a brief overview of relevant issues concerning trust relationships that occur in the online environment. In particular, the focus is on interpersonal trust between those who do not have a prior history of interaction, which is the trust relationship most applicable to the CouchSurfing context.

To provide a point of departure, the definitions of trust, its developmental stages, as well as the nature of trust in the online environment are explored in order to place this thesis's object of inquiry into a larger context. Next, issues pertinent to the formation of interpersonal trust in the online environment as well as the notion of perceived risk are examined. Finally, to narrow the focus and situate the subject at hand, existing research on trust in online hospitality networks is outlined in order to identify gaps in the literature.

This review is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of the literature due to the time constraints of this study. The sources of literature mainly derive from the electronic databases available at Tallinn University as well as the World Wide Web. More specifically, the following databases were used: JSTOR, EBSCO, Emerald Fulltext, SpringerLINK, Wiley InterScience and Sage Journals Online.

The search strategy related to trust and the online environment comprised of terms such as "trust", "initial trust", interpersonal trust" AND "online" OR "virtual" OR "internet". There was no limit in the year of publication in the search strategy in order to receive a breadth of information. As well, in the searches for literature regarding trust in the online environment, the inclusion of words such as "online" OR "virtual" OR "internet" would naturally limit the results to works published in the last 10-15 years or so.

The search strategy used for trust and online hospitality networks consisted of terms such as: “trust” AND “online” OR “virtual” OR “internet” AND “hospitality network” OR “hospitality exchange” OR “CouchSurfing”, with no limit in the year of publication in order to retrieve all possible results.

In addition to the aforementioned sources, another source of information used for locating existing research on CouchSurfing were two online groups that are part of the CouchSurfing community. One was the “Thesis Writers” group and the other, the “Help with research” group. Both groups include members who are currently writing their theses on CouchSurfing as well as other topics. In particular, one of the aims of the “Help with research” group is to collect and consolidate research that has been conducted or is currently being conducted on CouchSurfing. At the moment, the list of research found on this group is not exhaustive because it is based on members reporting their own or other’s research. As well, most of the research that is listed is currently in progress, thus not yet suitable to be listed in this review.

2.1 Definitions of Trust

There does not seem to be consensus on a universal definition of trust (Sutcliffe, 2006; Huotari & Iivonen, 2004; Marsh, 1994, as cited in Davenport & McLaughlin, 2004; Kramer, 1999). The reason for this ambiguity is that the study of trust spans across a wide variety of disciplines, such as sociology (Shapiro, 1987, as cited in McKnight & Chervany, 2001; Zucker, 1986, as cited in Pavlou, 2002), organizational management (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies, 1998; McKnight & Chervany, 2002; Meyerson, Weick & Kramer, 1996), psychology (Rotter, 1967; Deutsch, 1958), political science (Cole, 1973; Levi & Stoker, 2000), e-commerce (Jarvenpaa & Tractinsky, 1999; Gefen, 2000; McKnight & Chervany, 2002; Pavlou & Gefen, 2004; Yu & Singh, 2002) and computer science (Kamvar, Schlosser, & Garcia-Molina, 2004; Resnick, Zeckhauser, Friedman & Kuwabara, 2000; Abdul-Rahman & Hailles, 2000).

Furthermore, McKnight and Chervany (2001) state that “trust has been defined both a noun and a verb (e.g. Barber, 1983), as both a personality trait (Rotter, 1971) and a belief (Lindsold, 1978), and as both a social structure (Shapiro, 1987) and a behavioural intention (Currall & Judge, 1995; Scanzoni, 1979)” (p. 28). Moreover, McKnight and Chervany

provide an excellent analogy to describe this conundrum. They likened the lack of a distinct definition to the tale of the six blind men asked to describe an elephant based on the part of the animal that they had touched. According to McKnight and Chervany (2001), “it appears that psychologists analyzed the personality side, sociologists interviewed the social structural side, and economists calculated the rational choice side of the trust elephant” (p. 29).

Therefore, depending on the discipline of the researcher, the context in which trust is studied would affect how it is perceived, conceptualized and measured (Palmer, Bailey, & Faraj, 2000). To complicate matters even further, the everyday usage of the word “trust” – like the words “love” and “beauty” – conveys a rich set of meanings that is highly subjective and idiosyncratic. These ambiguities create confusion because although researchers may be talking about “trust” they are in fact examining and comparing different things. For example, confusion may result if one is talking about trust *feelings* while another, about trust *behaviours* or *actions*. Perhaps it would be useful to make a distinction between the two. J. Boyd (2003) states that “[t]rust’ as a cognitive concept differs from trusting action” (p. 400). This seems to be analogous to McKnight and Chervany’s (2001b) distinction between “trusting beliefs” and “trusting intentions”. Trusting beliefs refer to the cognitive belief that the trustee is competent, benevolent and honest in a particular situation and trusting intentions refer to the trustor’s willingness to rely upon or be vulnerable to the trustee (McKnight & Chervany, 2001b). For example, it is one thing to say that a CouchSurfer trusts another CouchSurfer by “friending” him or her online (i.e. trust feelings or beliefs) but it is another matter to give the keys to one’s house to a CouchSurfer when s/he arrives (i.e. trust actions or intentions). Hence, one might possess trusting beliefs in another person but still be unwilling to be vulnerable to the other party due to possible perceived risks.

Despite the confusion, trust seems to have been primarily defined in the context of interpersonal relationships in the social sciences literature. For example, Rotter (1971) views trust as “an expectancy held by an individual or a group that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of another individual or group can be relied on” (p. 444). Meanwhile, Fukuyama (1995) describes trust as the “expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community” (p. 26).

The notion of expectation is also found in Deutsch's definition of trust. He believes that "an individual may be said to have trust in the occurrence of an event if he expects its occurrence and his expectation leads to behavior which he perceives to have greater negative motivational consequences if the expectation is not confirmed than positive motivational consequences if it is confirmed" (Deutsch, 1958, p. 266).

Alternatively, Luhmann (1979) primarily viewed trust as a mechanism to help reduce the complexities and uncertainties of daily life because when humans are faced with uncertainty or too many possibilities, indecisiveness or inaction will tend to result. Thus, Luhmann believed that when we trust, "one engages in an action as though there were only certain possibilities in the future" (Luhmann, 1979, p. 20). Furthermore, he believed that trust brings about "co-operative action and individual but coordinated action: trust, by the reduction of complexity, discloses possibilities for action which would have remained improbable and unattractive without trust—which would not, in other words, have been pursued" (Luhmann, 1979, p. 25).

For some trust theorists, it is believed that risk and trust are related constructs. They believe that the need for trust arises in only risky situations. For example, Lewis and Weigert (1985) perceive trust as the "undertaking of a risky course of action on the confident expectation that all persons involved in the action will act competently and dutifully" (p. 971). Similarly, Kramer (1999) states that "trust entails a state of perceived vulnerability or risk that is derived from individuals' uncertainty regarding the motives, intentions, and prospective actions of others on whom they depend" (p. 571) and Luhmann (1988) believes that trust is "based on a circular relation between risk and action, both being complementary requirements" (p. 100).

As evidenced by the variety of definitions, trust can mean many things partly due to the aforementioned reasons and partly due to its dynamic and evolving nature. For the purposes of this thesis report, trust is defined according to Kramer's (1999) definition.

2.1.1 The Stages of Trust

As mentioned, trust is dynamic and evolving as it progresses through various stages in a relationship. Trust that is formed at the beginning stages of a relationship is referred to as initial trust, which differs from the other stages of trust (Jones & George, 1998; Rousseau,

Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998). McKnight, Cummings and Chervany (1998) define initial trust as the trust that surfaces “when parties first meet or interact” (p. 473). Similarly, Bigley and Pierce (1998) refer to initial trust as the “trust in an unfamiliar trustee, a relationship in which the actors not yet have credible, meaningful information about, or affective bonds with, each other” (p. 410).

In an online social networking community such as CouchSurfing, the primary interactions taking place are usually between parties who do not know each other and thus, do not have a prior mutual history. Hence, these relationships could be characterized as belonging to initial trust.

According to Xu and Kim (2003), who reference both Jones and George (1998) and Rousseau et al. (1998), the life cycle of trust includes the following three stages: initial trust, trust stabilization, and trust dissolution. Xu and Kim (2003) define initial trust as “the trust one party has to another before they engage in the first trust behavior,” trust stabilization is the “mature stage” and trust dissolution is when “a party senses the first betrayal behaviour of another” (p. 1503).

According to McKnight and Chervany (2006), initial trust is important because practically all relationships start with an initial phase where both parties are unfamiliar with each other and need to gain “verifiable information by first-hand interactional or transactional experience with each other” (p. 29) in order to build trust. This very last point is of particular relevance to the CouchSurfing context because it is the lack of “first-hand interactional or transactional experience” that makes it difficult to decide whether another member could be trusted. Although these definitions were specific for the offline environment, they arguably could be applied in the online environment as well. The following section explores the notion of trust in the online environment.

2.2 Trust in the Online Environment

Literature on trust building in the online environment seems to define the relationship between the trustor (i.e. the trusting party) and the trustee (i.e. the trusted party) in two ways: 1) technology as the object of trust and 2) individual-to-individual trust relationships mediated by technology (Corritore, Kracher & Wiedenbeck, 2003). The first approach often explores

commercial websites as objects of trust in the Business-to-Consumer (B2C) setting (Jarvenpaa & Tractinsky, 1999; Gefen, 2000; McKnight & Chervany, 2002) as well as the adoption of new technology (Li, Hess & Valacich, 2008) and recommendation agents in e-commerce (Wang & Benbasat, 2007), among other instances.

The second approach – the one most applicable to the CouchSurfing context – is often manifested in the online Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) setting (e.g. online marketplaces such as eBay and Craigslist) (Pavlou & Gefen, 2004; Meents, Tan & Verhagen, 2004), social networking sites (Goldbeck, 2008; Dwyer, Hiltz & Passerini, 2007), online dating services (Hardey, 2004; Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006), Peer-to-Peer (P2P) networks (Kamvar, Schlosser & Garcia-Molina, 2004) and virtual teamwork within organizations (Piccoli & Ives, 2003; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). It is this individual-to-individual, that is, interpersonal online trust that is the focus of this literature review. Thus, issues related to technology as the object of trust are beyond the scope of this review.

2.2.1 Formation of Interpersonal Trust (offline and online)

In general, Bailey, Gurak and Konstan (2001) depict the process of trust production in the manner outlined below in Fig. 3, regardless of whether the setting is online or offline.

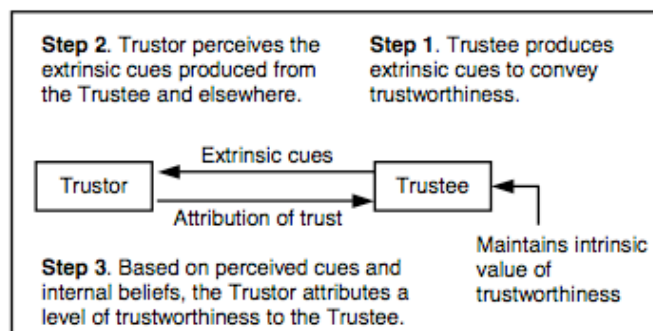


Figure 3: Trust production process (Bailey et al., 2001)

Bailey et al. (2001) explain that the trustee has an intrinsic level of trustworthiness, however, the trustor is not aware of the actual extent. Therefore, the trustor is forced to rely upon

extrinsic trust cues produced by the trustee and elsewhere to ascertain a possible level of trustworthiness. The concepts of trust and trustworthiness are not the same; Bailey et al. point out that trustworthiness can be looked at from the perspective of both the trustee and the trustor. From the perspective of the trustee, Bailey et al. view trustworthiness as “an objective quality governing the degree to which transactional obligations will be fulfilled in situations characterized by risk or uncertainty” and to the trustor, it is “an attribution of trust” (Bailey et al., 2001, para. 7). Thus, interpreting Bailey et al.’s trust production model, the decision to trust appears to be based on an evaluation of extrinsic trust cues produced by the trustee and other influences.

Although not termed as “extrinsic trust cues” but they might possibly be considered as such, Nissenbaum (2001) has identified several conditions that influence the formation of trust, these include:

1. “History and reputation” – past behaviour will likely influence whether or not trust will be elicited in the future.
2. “Inferences based on personal characteristics” – the presence of certain types of personal characteristics will influence whether or not trust will be formed; Nissenbaum provides examples offered by Pettit and Seligman. Pettit (1995) identifies four personal qualities, these include: virtue, loyalty, prudence and a desire for the good opinion of others. Alternatively, Seligman (1997) believes that familiarity, similarity and shared values play an important role in the formation of trust.
3. “Relationships: mutuality and reciprocity” – in a mutual relationship, both parties share a common ends (i.e. they are “in the same boat” as one another); in a reciprocal relationship, there is a sense of tit-for-tat, as Nissenbaum explains. Therefore, the presence of these two types of relationships influence trust formation.
4. “Role fulfilment” – the inherent understandings of societal roles has a bearing upon the formation of trust. For example, Nissenbaum provides the example of pilots, she has trust in pilots because as she states: “I know what pilots are supposed to do, I am aware of the rigorous training they undergo, the stringent requirements for accreditation, and

the status of airlines within a larger social, political and legal system” (Nissenbaum, 2001, p. 111).

According to Giddens (1990), this is a form of faceless trust in abstract systems, which comprises of “symbolic tokens” such as money and “expert systems” such as science and technology. Giddens (1990) explains that: “the real repository of trust is in the abstract system, rather than the individuals who in specific contexts ‘represent’ it” (Giddens, 1990, p. 85).

5. “Contextual factors” – according to Nissenbaum (2001), “the nature of the setting in which we act” (p. 112) is an important factor. Nissenbaum believes that there are four relevant aspects related to setting that encourage the formation of trust. These include: the publication of fidelity as well as betrayal, the presence of reward and punishment in response to fidelity and betrayal, the existence of norms if a system of reward and punishment is not available, and the presence of policies, insurance or safety nets should a betrayal of trust occur (Nissenbaum, 2001).

Evidently, these conditions were described in the context of the offline environment. However, counterparts to these conditions are believed to exist online as well, which are further explored below. Thus, one begs the question – if an online community contains components that satisfy these trust formation conditions, then does the environment, whether online or offline, even matter? Nevertheless, the nature of the online environment is believed to have a few obstacles that make trust formation a little more challenging than in the offline environment.

2.2.2 Obstacles to Online Trust Formation

According to Pettit (2004), online trust between individuals who do not have an existing network of associations and friendships in the offline environment is difficult to form. In Pettit’s opinion, trust is an entity that falls under reliance and the two are quite distinct. He believes that it is possible to rely upon another stranger in the online environment but it is impossible to trust. According to Pettit (2004), to rely is to “manifest confidence in dealing with them that they are of the relevant type or are disposed to behave in the relevant way” (p. 109). Furthermore, reliance is “a routine and presumptively rational activity” and no different

than relying on the accuracy of a clock (Pettit, 2004). Trust, on the other hand, is something different.

Pettit believes that there are two types of trust – primary and secondary trust. Primary trust is “the belief that certain people are trustworthy: that is, have stable dispositions like loyalty and virtue and prudence/perception” (Pettit, 2004, p. 117) and secondary trust is:

the belief that even if the people in question are not trustworthy—even if they do not have stable dispositions of the kind mentioned—they are meta-disposed to display the trait or behaviour that the trustor relies on them, now in this instance, now in that, to display. More concretely, they desire esteem and they can be moved by the esteem communicated by an act of trust—and perhaps broadcast to others—into becoming disposed to be or act as the trustor wants them to be or act. (Pettit, 2004, p. 117)

In other words, the trustor’s act of conferring trust motivates the trustee to behave or perform reliably in return because s/he desires the esteem or good opinion of the trustor, which Pettit (2004) refers to as “trust-responsiveness”.

Pettit (2004) believes that it is difficult to determine whether someone online is loyal, virtuous or prudent due to the lack of three things in the online environment. The first is the lack of the “evidence of face”, which refers to body language, gestures, words, facial expressions and visual appearance that contribute to bodily presence. Secondly, is the lack of the “evidence of frame”, which is the ability to observe and note the interaction of an individual with others. Thirdly, is the lack of the “evidence registered in a personal file on the people involved”, in other words, the historical record accumulated over time about another individual regarding their behaviour towards others.

Furthermore, Pettit (2004) considers Internet contacts to be merely “spectral presences” that are easily mutable. He compares this to the myth of the Ring of Gyges, mentioned in Plato’s *The Republic*. Plato pondered if we are still able to remain virtuous if we are in possession of a ring that will allow us to become invisible at will. According to Pettit, we all wear the ring of Gyges when we interact in the online environment because we have the ability to make our true identities invisible and/or undetectable. Consequently, Pettit views trust amongst strangers in the virtual environment, at least for the moment, to be a fantasy.

Similar to Pettit's arguments, Nissenbaum (2001) has identified three obstacles to the formation of online trust. These include:

1. "Missing identities" – in the online environment, one is free to provide as much or as little information about oneself as one desires, thus one does not have the ability to form a complete or accurate picture of the other when deciding whether or not to trust them
2. "Missing personal characteristics" – in a face-to-face interaction, attitudes of trust can be determined from physical cues and personal characteristics but in a disembodied environment such as the Internet, personal characteristics such as age, gender, ethnic background, and socioeconomic status are difficult to verify, thus there is the concern that the persona online does not reflect the person in reality.
3. "Inscrutable contexts" – the lack of role definition is a problem in trust formation in the online environment. As mentioned above, the decision to trust can be based upon the presence of societal roles, however, Nissenbaum believes that for the moment, this is lacking in the online environment. She adds that even if online roles are equivalent to their offline counterparts, such as the role of a "shopkeeper", there is a lack of "explicit frameworks of assurances that support them" (p. 114).

J. Boyd (2003) agrees with Nissenbaum that trust is difficult to establish online due to the obstacles above. He also makes the following assumptions about trust, based on a review of the trust literature:

- (a) Initial trust is the most difficult to achieve; (b) people trust what they already know, and trust becomes cumulative; (c) trust is in actors, not systems; and (d) trusting behavior results from accepting a little more risk or extending a little more trust. (p. 403)

J. Boyd adds that although it is challenging to develop initial trust online, subsequent transactions would be easier because according to Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995), "outcomes of trusting behaviors will lead to updating of prior perceptions of the ability, benevolence, and integrity of the trustee" (p. 728). Furthermore, J. Boyd believes that initial trusting behaviours do not imply the presence of a high level of trust; it merely indicates that the trustor intends to act as if trust is present. This is somewhat similar to "swift trust", a

concept developed by Meyerson, Weick and Kramer (1996), which incidentally, seems to bear a resemblance to Pettit's notion of secondary trust.

Swift trust is usually associated with temporary teams put together to work on a clearly defined goal for a finite period of time, often characterized by high time pressure and high risk (Meyerson et al., 1996). In the online context, this usually refers to global virtual teams (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). In a study that was conducted by Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999), teams of students unfamiliar with one another were tasked to collaborate on a virtual project. They found that those who had assumed trust existed in the beginning had a greater chance for trust to actually form later on (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). de Laat (2005) also provides the case of volunteer groups and individuals from around the world working together on open source software as an example. Team members usually do not know one another at the outset but are called upon to suspend their doubts about the abilities of the other members in order to achieve a group's goal. Thus, trust is assumed rather than developed.

Although initial trust refers to a particular stage of trust development and swift trust refers to a certain type of trust, both are fragile constructs perhaps due to a lack of information or first hand experience between the trustor(s) and trustee(s) at the beginning of a relationship. In any case, according to J. Boyd (2003), establishing initial trust is "the fundamental rhetorical challenge of trust building online" (p. 402).

In a qualitative study conducted by Ryan (2004) that explored initial trust formation in an online social activist community (i.e. a voluntary non-profit organization), it was found that it was not possible for the organization to extend initial trust to prospective members solely based on the online information provided by the applicants. Trust amongst members of social activist communities is important because there is the potential risk of someone with dubious intentions inflicting political or social damage to the organization. To mitigate these risks, Ryan found that it was necessary for the organization to verify an applicant's reputation by checking with third parties (i.e. speaking with someone already involved with the organization and asking them about their opinions of the applicant) as well as using offline means (such as phone calls or interviews) to interact with the applicants in order to gauge their true interest and intentions. This study employed an iterative online asynchronous focus group as well as

observation of face-to-face discussions amongst members of the online activist organization regarding the prospective members' applications.

2.2.3 Mechanisms to Help Establish Online Trust

In order to engender online trust, J. Boyd (2003) believes that elements fundamental to creating offline trust, for example, Nissenbaum's identity, personal characteristics and role definition, should be replicated online in order to create a sense of familiarity or what McKnight et al. (1998) refer to as "situational normality". J. Boyd explains that:

At online auction eBay, for instance, "community members" enter each transaction in the clear role of "bidder" or "seller," and personal characteristics can be inferred from the feedback testimonials of others. Their "identities" emerge from user names, icons with meaning to the community of users, and a feedback number that reflects experience and reliability on the site. (p. 403)

Interestingly, with social networking services such as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn, growing in popularity during the last several years, the ability to create, control and modify one's online identity and become members of all sorts of online communities has never been easier. d. boyd and Ellison (2007) define social network¹ sites as:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. (para. 4)

These public or semi-public self-descriptive profiles are an integral part of participating in a social networking community and are intended to represent who the members are in reality. These profiles, such as those found on the CouchSurfing website, may include elements such as photos, personal information, an indication of how users are connected with other users within the community (e.g. levels of friendship, professional ties), a history of activity, opinions about other users, and reputation score. Aside from enabling members of these communities to connect with one another, these profiles are also often used by members to

¹ d. boyd and Ellison make a distinction between "social networking sites" and "social network sites"; the former implies that there is some form of networking involved, often amongst strangers, while the latter involves initiating/maintaining contact with people one already knows.

form trust decisions and/or impressions of others based on the information provided. However, how accurate are these online representations?

Research in online dating services has found that the anticipation of future interaction in the offline environment motivates people to present a more honest description of themselves on their online profiles (Gibbs, Ellison & Heino, 2006; Hardey, 2002) as well as foster a greater exchange of personal information (Gibbs et al., 2006). In Gibbs et al.'s (2006) study, 349 members of the online dating site, Match.com, answered an online survey that inquired about the members' "online dating history and goals, online dating experience and attitudes, online self-disclosure (including honesty, amount, intent, and valence), perceived online dating success and intimacy, and demographic questions" (p. 162). It was found that members whose aims were to develop face-to-face relationships as a result of using these online services were likely to be more honest about their self-disclosures. They also tended to reveal more personal information about themselves and were cognisant of the type of information they chose to disclose. Gibbs et al. remarked that surprisingly, these self-disclosures include both positive and negative attributes due to the knowledge that these attributes might be revealed in future face-to-face interactions.

de Laat (2005) believes that building online trust involves challenges but it is theoretically possible. Furthermore, de Laat (2005) refutes Pettit's aforementioned claim (i.e. inexistence of virtual trust due to the lack of evidence of face, frame and file) by noting that despite the obstacles present in the online environment, "pure virtuals" interacting online have developed ways to cope with the absence of available mechanisms for trust building. He explains that mechanisms to help establish trustworthiness include such things as: 1) third parties 2) reputation systems 3) social cuing and 4) (quasi-) institutions. However, de Laat believes that these aspects of primary trust cannot be relied upon solely to build trust because they do include some shortcomings (a few are described below). Therefore, secondary trust also plays an important role in the formation of online trust. To come to this conclusion, de Laat explored the technological modes (i.e. mailing lists and websites) used by three Internet communities: namely, trading communities, task groups (i.e. groups formed for professional or academic purposes) and non-task groups (i.e. groups formed for recreational purposes or to offer group support).

de Laat (2005) explains that third parties are mechanisms put into place in order to help bridge the gap in trust between two parties. For example, A and B do not trust each other but they do trust C, so they involve C to act as an intermediary. de Laat mentions that third parties are quite common in e-commerce settings in order to lower the perceived risks of transacting online. For example, third parties may include escrow services or forms of payment such as PayPal or credit cards with a chargeback guarantee (de Laat, 2005). In this way, both buyer and seller are protected against non-payment of funds or non-delivery of goods. Another example of a third party is the presence of seals of approval (e.g. VeriSign, TRUSTe, Hacker Safe, etc.), primarily used for website verification for issues of privacy, security and business identity. A buyer may be wary of transacting with a website they do not know but the presence of these seals might alleviate worries or fears.

As previously mentioned, Pettit (2004) believes that a “personal file” recording the behaviour of virtual strangers towards others is not present in the online environment. However, de Laat (2005) counters that reputation systems can act as a viable substitute.

Reputation systems provide the personal history of an individual that could be used to judge the risk of entering a transaction with that individual. For example, in online auction sites such as eBay, buyers and sellers can rate each other’s performances. In CouchSurfing, reputation is determined by the types of references (i.e. negative, positive and neutral) left for an individual by other members. However, reputation systems are not foolproof. In some cases, there seems to be a bias towards providing positive ratings instead of negative ones. For example, the findings in a study conducted within the eBay community by Resnick and Zeckhauser (2002), indicated that only 0.6% of the ratings given by buyers and 1.6% of the ratings given by sellers were negative. Some possible reasons Resnick and Zeckhauser provided for this reputation inflation were: the fear of retaliation as a result of giving a negative rating, the obligation to provide positive feedback if the other party has provided one and the idea of “High Courtesy”, that is, being nice or courteous for the sake of being nice because everyone else in the community is behaving in such a manner (Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002).

Resnick and Zeckhauser (2002) suggest two ways to counteract these problems, one is paying initiation dues and the other is “stoning” bad behaviour. The first refers to either a monetary

payment in order to become a member of a community or the investment of time and effort at the beginning by new members until their reputations have been built. The second solution offered by Resnick and Zeckhauser refers to the possible “contagion effect” (as they term it) resulting from the presence of negative feedback. They believe that if there is some negative feedback, others would be more inclined in the future to cast a “negative feedback” stone, so to speak. In this way, the offending individual would be stoned out of the community.

Both solutions seem to be problematic because in the first solution, if the example of eBay were used, an unscrupulous person could sell many items at a low price (perhaps even amongst friends), earn numerous amounts of positive feedback to build a good reputation, then make an expensive sale to an unsuspecting buyer and not deliver the product, which has reportedly happened on many occasions (Riegelsberger, Sasse & McCarthy, 2005). For the second solution, this would require someone to cast that first stone. If the culture of the community does not make this an easy thing to do, then it would just be simpler for members to maintain the status quo. As well, there would need to be some sort of mechanism in place to prevent people with a bad reputation from abandoning their profiles and creating new ones with different identities. Incidentally, this concern was discussed in an earlier article co-authored by Resnick (Friedman & Resnick, 2001).

The third mechanism that helps establish trustworthiness, according to de Laat, is the conveyance of social cues from how individuals present themselves textually and graphically online. de Laat believes that there is no such thing as a pure virtual, since online identities are attached to real human beings. Hence, at the end of the day, there is a human being sitting in front of the computer on the other end. Similarly, Sundén believes that the way people interact and present themselves online is influenced by how they are offline because “the virtual does not automatically equate disembodiment” (Sundén, 2003, as cited in d. boyd, 2008). Thus, according to Sundén, the communication that individuals conduct online conveys cues and meanings about who they are in reality.

Certainly, in face-to-face communication, one is able to observe the other’s body language, tone, facial expression, and unique mannerisms. In the online environment, the absence of such visual cues makes it more difficult to detect the intended meaning of a message. However, Walther’s Social Information Processing (SIP) theory posits that in a computer-

mediated environment, people use alternative ways to form impressions of others based on the information provided on their computer screen (Walther, 1996). For example, in a study on impression management amongst online daters, Ellison et al. (2006) found that the online daters depended upon small cues such as the time stamp, style of language used, spelling and grammar mistakes, and length of message in order to form an impression of other members within the online dating community.

de Laat (2005) also mentions a related communication theory, the hyperpersonal model of computer-mediated communication, coined by Walther (1996) where “the few remaining cues are blown up in significance in a process of over-attribution of the similarity” (de Laat, 2005, p. 174). de Laat (2005) cautions that: “As receivers, participants perceive senders in an idealized fashion, and as senders, they optimize their self-presentation – which is facilitated by the asynchronous mode of communication” (p. 174). Walthers (1996) elaborates that:

Among zero-history CMC participants particularly, one was not bound by the cues to personality [that] others infer from physical appearance or vocalic attributes. They were better able to plan, and had increased opportunities to self-censor. With more time for message construction and less stress of ongoing interaction, users may have taken the opportunity for objective self-awareness, reflection, selection and transmission of favourable cues. (p. 19)

According to de Laat (2005), the final mechanism that assists in the formation of online trust are (quasi-) institutions. These refer to aspects inherent in institutions such as “a common culture, established rules and regulations, division of roles, and professional qualifications” (de Laat, 2005, p. 175). de Laat explains that the prefix “quasi-“ is used because there are many virtual volunteer groups that are not institutions per se but have the qualities of institutions.

2.3 Perceived Risks

Similar to definitions of trust, there is no common agreement on the conceptualization of risk (Conchar, Zinkhan, Peters, & Olavarrieta, 2004; Das & Teng, 2004) since the notion of risk is discussed in a variety of disciplines such as marketing, finance, psychology, management, public policy, and others. Nonetheless, the ideas of uncertainty and probability seem to be associated with situations of risk (Das & Teng, 2004). More precisely, Baird and Thomas (1985) consider risk as “a condition in which the consequences of a decision and the

probabilities associated with the consequences are known entities” (p. 231). Hence, they seem to regard risk as something that can be controlled or managed via a process of decision-making.

As previously mentioned, the concept of risk is often found in definitions of trust since it is believed by some trust theorists that risk is an essential condition for trust to occur (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Kramer, 1999; Luhmann, 1998). According to Mayer et al., perceived risk in the context of trust can be viewed as the “trustor’s belief about likelihood of gains or losses outside of considerations that involve the relationship with the particular trustee” (1995, p. 726). To think of this in another way, if the level of perceived risk is higher than the level of trust attitudes, then the trustor would be less inclined to develop trusting intentions and/or engage in trusting behaviour. In fact, trust and perceived risk could be thought of as sharing an inverse relationship – a high trust situation suggests that there are not many perceived risks, while a low trust situation implies that many perceived risks are present (Jøsang & Lo Presti, 2004).

2.4.1 Risk Management Strategies

In a study conducted by Couch and Liamputtong (2007), the perceptions of risk amongst members of online dating communities in Australia were explored. Online interviews using instant messaging (i.e. MSN Messenger) were conducted with 15 people who regularly participated in online dating. Couch and Liamputtong found that the respondents used various techniques (described below) in order to understand and manage the perceived risks associated with participating in online dating.

The researchers employed three risk management strategies suggested by Peretti-Watel and Moatti to discuss their findings. Namely, people deny the presence of risks by scapegoating, comparing between risks, and having self-confidence in their decision-making process. Scapegoating refers to the case where “the individual notes a difference between ‘them’ the risky people and ‘us’ the safe people”, the comparison between risks is when “one denies a risk by comparing it to another already well-accepted risk” and self-confidence is “when an individual trusts their own personal ability to control risky situations” (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007, p. 288-289). Furthermore, Couch and Liamputtong found that the participants of their study acknowledged the presence of risks but the ability to control the amount and type of

information they give about themselves online as well as being able to screen people before deciding whether or not to interact with them, minimizes the risks of online dating.

According to Markham (1998), in the online environment, people have a high level of control over the amount of information they wish to share with others, with whom they wish to interact, and how they present themselves. As well, Lewicki and Bunker (1996) believe that the ability to control a situation reduces the perception of risk. Thus, in a situation where there is a lack of control, perceptions of risk are higher.

Since online dating shares a similar trust building relationship with CouchSurfing, whereby members first make contact in the online environment and then meet in the offline environment, similar concerns of risk may be present. Hence, this study makes use of certain elements of Couch and Liamputtong's study (i.e. the data collection method, the snowball sampling technique, and risk management strategies) in order to explore the perceptions of risk and trust in online communities, more specifically, online hospitality networks. The following section discusses examples of research that has already been conducted on trust and CouchSurfing to identify if there is a gap in the literature.

2.4 Existing Research on Trust and Online Hospitality Networks

Most of the existing research associated with online hospitality networks and trust seems to comprise of Master's theses, PhD dissertations and course projects (Bialski & Batorski, 2007; Bialski, 2007; Koszewska, 2008, Lauterbach & Shah, 2008). Thus, there does not seem to be an abundance of published scholarly literature on the topic.

Bialski and Batorski from the Institute of Sociology of the University of Warsaw presented a poster at the 2007 Sunbelt Social Network Conference that looked at the measurement of trust in the CouchSurfing community. Using network data provided by the administrators of CouchSurfing, they wanted to find out the variables that are key to the strengthening or weakening of trust. Three variables they considered were: "the duration of acquaintanceship based on year met and days hosted/visited", "the level of homophily between two actors based on city, country, age, and gender" [*N.B. actors refer to the trustor and trustee*], and "the type of acquaintanceship determined by one of four possible relationship contexts: (1) ties made online and maintained only online (online-only), (2) ties made online and maintained offline

(online-offline), (3) those who became acquainted online and then offline while hosting or visiting each other (Couchsurfing), (4) and strictly offline ties made prior to joining Couchsurfing (offline)” (Bialski & Batorski, 2007).

Their findings included: the level of risk and the context of relations seemed to influence the formation of trust, namely, in an instance where there was high risk involved (i.e. “those who became acquainted online and then offline while hosting or visiting each other”), Bialski and Batorski found that “the more one risks (Couchsurfing = high risk, Online = low risk), the more the one will trust the other” (Bialski & Batorski, 2007). Furthermore, those involved with Couchsurfing (i.e. either hosting or visiting each other), where there is a certain degree of risk involved, were more likely to trust one another than those only involved with relationship context number two (i.e. ties made online and maintained offline, without hosting or visiting). Bialski and Batorski also found that homophily had no impact on the degree of trust formed. Another finding was that the longer the parties knew one another, as well as the longer the time spent hosting/visiting, the stronger the degree of trust would likely be built.

However, Bialski and Batorski make clear the caveat that their data set is incomplete because in August 2006, a new friendship ratings system was implemented but only 60% of the members had updated their friendship link information. Consequently, their findings would be affected by the missing data. As well, their research was solely based on quantitative data obtained from Couchsurfing and not qualitative data from their members. Thus, it would be interesting to find out if members actually perceive the relationship of risk and trust in the same way as suggested by the findings of their study.

In 2007, Bialski completed a Master’s thesis focused on The Couchsurfing Project, titled *Intimate Tourism: Friendships in a State of Mobility – the Case of the Online Hospitality Network*, which has also been translated into French and recently published as a book (Bialski, 2008). As a sociologist, her research looked at what she terms “Systems of Intimate Mobility,” which encompasses hospitality exchange networks such as Couchsurfing. She believes that these types of computer-mediated networks transform the traditional idea of friendship, trust and intimacy. Bialski found through her interviews with Couchsurfers that both surfer and host often end up sharing personal histories or details about themselves with each other – things they would not normally share with their regular circle of friends. She

believes that this phenomenon, which she calls “intimate tourism”, exists because the two parties, usually strangers, are interacting in the personal sphere of the host (Bialski, 2007). As well, these brief but intimate encounters often happen because it is likely that they may not have the chance to see each other ever again. Incidentally, this phenomenon of sharing intimate details about oneself to strangers over a brief period of time is also found in online dating (Lawson & Leck, 2006).

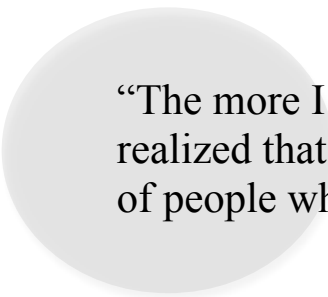
Koszewska, also of the University of Warsaw, defended her Master’s thesis, *Gift, Exchange and Trust: Information (its Role, Management and Access to Information) in Modern Society on the Example of Free-Hospitality Networks*, in the fall of 2008. As indicated by the title, her research explored the role of information in free-hospitality networks. Her thesis did not specifically focus on the issue of trust per se but part of her empirical research (interviews and an online survey administered to members of CouchSurfing and the Hospitality Club) did touch upon this topic. In her survey, which was answered by 50 CouchSurfers and 15 Hospitality Club members, she inquired about the reasons that made people accept hospitality requests. She found that a large number of people were influenced by the references on the profiles. Other important factors were the presence of weak ties (i.e. if the requestor was a “friend of a friend” of the host), shared interests, whether or not the request was properly written, gender, and even for some, attractiveness of the individual in the profile. Koszewska remarked that many of the people she surveyed accepted almost everyone who asked. She speculated that perhaps they are naïve or have a great amount of trust in the security measures present in the network. Thus, they would assume that if one was in the network, s/he has to be a trustworthy individual (Koszewska, 2008).

As a term-project for a university course in the fall of 2008, Lauterbach and Shah analysed the effectiveness of the CouchSurfing vouching system by using network analysis techniques to determine the trustworthiness of the members. They only looked at the CouchSurfing community in France but some of their findings included: many members have already been vouched numerous times and many of the vouches are between friends who have weak friendship levels, which is a bit worrying since members are advised to only vouch for people they know very well and have met in person (Lauterbach & Shah, 2008). Thus, theory and practice of the vouching system may not be in agreement with one another.

2.5 Conclusion

This literature review began with a broad exploration of literature on the concept of trust. Issues concerning the formation of interpersonal trust, obstacles to building online trust as well as mechanisms to help establish online trust were touched upon in subsequent sections. These topics were examined in order to provide the context to help answer the research questions. From the literature, there seems to be a disagreement as to whether trust is something that can or does exist in the online environment.

Finally, to narrow the scope, existing research conducted on the topic of trust and online hospitality networks were explored. From the examples provided in section 2.4 (Existing Research on Trust and Online Hospitality Networks), it appears that research on trust in online hospitality services is beginning to emerge. Furthermore, there does not appear to be research that examines issues of trust and risk in the CouchSurfing context from the perspective of the non-member. Thus, the empirical research described in the following chapters aims to address this gap in the literature.



“The more I traveled the more I realized that fear makes strangers of people who should be friends.”

- Shirley MacLaine

Chapter 3:

RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the methodology of this study, followed by an overview and justification for the method of data collection used to help address the research questions. Finally, the last section looks at the data analysis process.

As mentioned in Chapter 1: Introduction, this qualitative study is based upon an interpretivist approach. The data collection method consists of semi-structured interviews conducted via synchronous chat clients such as Skype and MSN Messenger with both non-members (6 in total) and members (6 in total) of the CouchSurfing community.

3.1 Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used as the basis of inquiry for this study in order to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings assigned by people to phenomena within their social reality (Snape & Spencer, 2003). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000),

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Accordingly, this study takes an interpretivist approach. Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) state that:

Interpretive studies assume that people create and associate their own subjective and intersubjective meanings as they interact with the world around them. Interpretive researchers thus attempt to understand phenomena through accessing the meanings participants assign to them. (p. 5)

Since interpretivists believe that each person forms his or her own reality, realities are “multiple, constructed and holistic” (Pickard, 2007, p. 12). Furthermore, the collected data is not value-neutral since the process of investigating a research problem is driven by the preconceptions and values of the researcher (Walsham, 1995). As well, since the researcher interacts with members of the community that they are studying, the perceptions of both parties may be altered as a result of the research activity (Walsham, 1995).

As Walsham (1995) implies, the researcher in a study is not 100% impartial. Understandably, this research has likely been influenced by my personal values as well as my Internet use experience. I would consider myself a fairly experienced Internet user who regularly participates in various social networking communities. Thus, the practice of creating online profiles and socialising online are not foreign concepts to me. Hence, this may suggest that I might be more open to CouchSurfing than someone who is more guarded about his/her online presence. Since I was not a CouchSurfing member prior to embarking on this study, the topic was approached with minimal knowledge about the trustworthiness or credibility of the CouchSurfing service. Had I been a long-standing member with a lot of CouchSurfing experience, it would have been difficult to approach this study objectively. Hence, it was for these reasons – in addition to the reasons outlined in Chapter 1: Introduction – that CouchSurfing was chosen as the studied community. Nonetheless, in the course of this study, I did become a member of CouchSurfing. The reason was to gain a better understanding of the community and how the service and the website operate from the member’s point of view. As well, it was hoped that trust and rapport could possibly be built with my respondents by offering some background information about myself via my online profile as well as demonstrating my interest in the community.

Perhaps Geertz (1973) summed up interpretive research best when he stated: “what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (p. 9). For these reasons above, the chosen methodology is the most appropriate way to answer the research questions of this study.

3.2 Sampling

As mentioned previously, there are two sample groups, one consisting of members and the other, non-members. In total, 6 members and 6 non-members from five different countries were interviewed. Amongst the members, there were 4 females and 2 males, with an age range of mid-20s to mid-40s. The CouchSurfing experience of the members ranges from those with a few experiences to veterans who have had many experiences hosting as well as surfing. Amongst the non-members, there were 4 females and 2 males, with an age range of late-20s to mid-50s. The similar outcome in the gender balance was coincidental, as a prescribed number of male and female respondents was not determined at the outset. However, the number of 6 members and 6 non-members was intentional. With the time constraints of this study, 12 interviews would be a manageable and reasonable number to analyse and from which conclusions could be drawn.

The rationale for choosing to include both members and non-members in this study was to obtain differing perspectives concerning trust and the risks associated with CouchSurfing. Hence, the purpose of collecting data from non-members was to acquire the viewpoints from those who are “unconverted” or not already proponents of the CouchSurfing philosophy. It was also important to include non-members in order to understand the types of risks and worries an online service such as CouchSurfing would have to mitigate in order to gain new members who trust the service.

Furthermore, according to Miles and Huberman (1984), the triangulation of different data sources (i.e. in this case, two different informant groups) is a strategy that could be used to improve the validity of research findings. However, there is debate as to whether triangulation can in fact increase validity in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Fielding & Fielding, 1986; Flick, 1992). According to Flick (1992), the purpose of interpretive research is not to identify one single reality, thus the use of triangulation is to add “breadth or depth to our analysis, not for the purpose of pursuing ‘objective’ truth” (Flick, 1992, p. 179). Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state that: “the combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry” (p.

5). Therefore, it is primarily for these reasons that the triangulation of informants has been used in this study.

3.2.1 Sampling Techniques

For the members group, since I did not know many members, social acquaintances were initially contacted to inquire if they know of members or are members themselves, given that it is quite possible that with over one million members worldwide, there may be a chance that one of them is connected to someone I personally know. Personalized messages via the CouchSurfing messaging system were also sent to see if members would be interested in participating.

After a few contacts were made, non-probability sampling, more precisely, snowball sampling was used. This involved asking people who have already been interviewed (or who have agreed to be interviewed) to identify other people who might be interested in being interviewed. There is the concern that the diversity of the sample might be affected, based upon the assumption that people likely associate with others similar to themselves (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2004), resulting in a homogenous sample. However, since the only criterion for the members respondent group was membership in the CouchSurfing community, the diversity of variables such as age, gender, race, or cultural background would not be a major concern.

A further reason for using snowball sampling was because according to Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005), it is “regarded as a useful sampling strategy for participants who may be hard to reach directly, but may be well-networked” (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005, as cited in Couch & Liamputtong, 2007, p. 6). As a new member of CouchSurfing, I did not have many contacts to rely upon initially, thus this was also a potential way of making contact with members already in an established network.

For the non-members, a convenience sample was used. In convenience sampling, “the researcher chooses the sample according to ease of access” (Ritchie et. al, 2004, p. 81). All of the respondents who were approached were based on my personal contacts, thus there is a possibility that there is bias since those in my social circle may share similar values and beliefs as myself. Consequently, although this group represented the “non-member” group, it is

important to stress that this group is not – and realistically cannot be – representative of the population as a whole. As previously stated, the purpose of including this group was to provide viewpoints and perspectives from those outside the community in order to add depth and breadth to this study.

3.3 Method of Data Collection

The following sections explore the rationale behind using semi-structured online synchronous interviews as the data collection method as well as its advantages and disadvantages. Additionally, the procedures of contacting and interacting with the respondents are described.

3.3.1 Online Synchronous Interviews

While contemplating the various possible ways to collect data that would best answer the research questions, several methods were considered: an online questionnaire, face-to-face interviews or online synchronous (i.e. “real time”) interviews using instant messaging (IM) clients such as Skype or MSN Messenger. While an online questionnaire could have been easier to administer than conducting an interview, several factors prompted the use of semi-structured interviews instead. The aim was to gain in-depth qualitative data, with the opportunity to interact with the respondents and ask clarifying, probing or follow-up questions if needed. Thus, semi-structured interviews would be the optimal method.

Face-to-face and online synchronous interviews were considered but the latter was chosen due to the reasons outlined below. In addition, interviews conducted virtually would enable anyone from anywhere around the world – with the technology and reliable Internet service – to take part, regardless of geography or time differences. Furthermore, face-to-face interviews would limit the sample population to only those located in Tallinn, Estonia. Although cultural background and nationality are not factors that concern this particular study, logistically, it would have been difficult and time-consuming to arrange face-to-face interviews (e.g. the need to find a space to do the interview, acquire recording equipment, the need to travel to the interview location, and the time to transcribe the interviews). Thus, conducting online synchronous interviews via instant messaging (IM) clients was chosen as a suitable data collection method.

IM clients are programs that enable real-time communication via the Internet. Text-based messages are sent back and forth between the parties, mimicking a conversation in a telephone call or face-to-face interaction. Many IM clients also have the capability to conduct chats with audio and/or video. In fact, one of the interviews was conducted via audio chat (akin to a telephone call) because the respondent preferred to have a verbal conversation instead of a textual one.

As previously mentioned, an advantage of using IM to conduct interviews is that the sample could theoretically consist of people from anywhere in the world with a reliable Internet connection. Hence, geography and time would not be an issue since the interview could be conducted in the comfort of the respondent and interviewer's workspaces.

Furthermore, some of the additional benefits of using IM (i.e. text chatting) are: a written transcript is generated as the interview is being conducted, which cuts down on the time to transcribe a face-to-face/audio/video interview as well as eliminate transcription error. Secondly, the respondent supplies the punctuation in their responses so they have greater control over determining the meaning of the messages they would like to convey. This also eliminates the error of misinterpretation by a transcriber. Thirdly, due to the lack of visual cues, people may be more open to express their feelings because the online environment "provides social spaces that are purportedly free of the constraints of the body, (so) you are accepted on the basis of your written words, not what you look like or sound like or where you live" (Kitchin 1998, p. 387). As well, Poster believes that "individuals appear to enjoy relating narratives to those they have never met and probably never will meet. The appeal is strong to tell one's tale to others, to many, many others" (Poster, 1995, para. 25).

However, the lack of visual cues in computer-mediated communication could also be perceived as a disadvantage. Subtle, non-verbal cues such as body language or even verbal cues such as tone of voice or inflection, which could help contextualize what the respondent is trying to express are absent in an online interview. Additionally, the lack of visual cues makes it difficult to build rapport between the interviewer and respondent. For example, the interviewer is not able to nod or smile at the respondent to demonstrate empathy or to encourage him/her to elaborate on an interesting point.

Although the disadvantages are veritable concerns, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages, in particular due to the time constraints of this five-month thesis project. Consequently, those were the reasons for selecting the chosen data collection method.

3.3.2 Member and Non-Member Interview Procedures

Member Interviews

Potential respondents were sent an email or contacted via the CouchSurfing message system to inquire about their interest in participating in an interview. If they agreed, an interview date and time was arranged. The interviews, conducted between April 22nd and May 13th, 2009, were carried out via Skype or MSN Messenger and lasted between 1 and 2 hours. After each interview, the respondents were offered the opportunity to have the chat transcript sent to them in order for them to make any additions or corrections to the transcript. For the interview that was conducted via audio chat, notes were taken while the respondent spoke. The notes were then typed up and sent back to the respondent as a method of respondent validation in order to check whether or not the thoughts and opinions of the respondent were correctly captured.

Non-Member Task and Interview

Potential respondents were sent an email that included a task (attached as Appendix 2) to give them an idea of what their participation would entail. The individuals then replied whether or not they were interested in participating in the study. For those interested, they were instructed to contact me whenever they finished the task so that an interview could be arranged (a time frame was indicated in the email sent). The interviews were conducted via Skype or MSN Messenger, which lasted on average about 2 hours in length. The interviews were conducted between April 12th and May 8th, 2009. After each interview, the respondents were offered the opportunity to have the chat transcript sent to them in order to ensure that what was expressed in the interview was actually what they wanted express.

3.4 Interview Questions

As previously stated, the difference between the member and non-member interviews was that the non-members were asked to complete a task in addition to the interview. The task involved browsing through the CouchSurfing website, learning about the trust building

mechanisms put into place by the service and searching for a profile of a CouchSurfer that the non-member would feel comfortable making a request with, if they were CouchSurfing. The purpose of the task was to acquaint non-members with CouchSurfing so that they would have some background knowledge about the service as well as simulate the experience of searching for a potential host. In this way, even if the non-members did not have firsthand CouchSurfing experience, they would hopefully have sufficient information in order to form some initial opinions about CouchSurfing as well as answer the interview questions.

The interview guides for both members and non-members (available in the Appendices) are fairly similar. The questions attempted to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter 1: Introduction, which include:

1. What type of profile information do CouchSurfers use to decide whom they can trust?
2. To what extent do people trust the information provided on the online CouchSurfing profiles?
3. What are the perceived risks of CouchSurfing?
4. What kind of strategies, if any, do CouchSurfers use in order to mitigate risks?

The member interview guide consisted of a list of 19 questions. The first seven questions attempted to learn about the members' general CouchSurfing experiences and their usual process of finding a host or deciding whether or not to accept a request. The following seven questions related to the type of information contributing to the formation of trust and general opinions regarding online trust (i.e. in response to research questions 1 and 2). Using this thesis's interpretation of the definition of trust, which is based on Kramer's view that: "trust entails a state of perceived vulnerability or risk that is derived from individuals' uncertainty regarding the motives, intentions, and prospective actions of others on whom they depend" (Kramer, 1999, p. 571), the final five questions attempted to investigate the members' perceptions of risk in CouchSurfing, if any, and how these risks could be managed (i.e. in response to research questions 3 and 4).

The non-member interview guide consisted of 12 questions. The first five questions attempted to find out the type of information contributing to the formation of online trust as well as

general opinions regarding online trust (i.e. in response to research questions 1 and 2). Similar to the reason stated in the section above, the next three questions were included to look at perceptions of risk in CouchSurfing and how these risks could be managed (i.e. in response to research questions 3 and 4). The following two questions attempted to find out if the non-members would consider participating in CouchSurfing and if not, what assurances would be needed for them to join. The purpose of asking these two questions was to see if their reasons were due to their perceptions of potential risk (i.e. research question 3) or other reasons. The final two questions were concerned with general opinions regarding online trust. The rationale for asking these two questions was, since the respondents do not have first hand CouchSurfing experience, they were asked to reflect on other online experiences that might share a similar trust relationship.

Since the interviews were semi-structured, the interview guide merely acted as a guideline. Thus, depending on the respondent and the flow of the conversation between the interviewer and the respondent, not all questions were posed to each respondent. Furthermore, the interview was not limited to the questions included in the interview guide; additional questions to probe, follow-up or clarify were also posed. Lastly, the order that the questions were asked did not strictly follow the order that has been presented in the interview guide.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All potential respondents were notified of what their participation in this study would entail and they were invited to contact me should they have any concerns. Informed consent was received from the interview participants via their correspondence (e.g. email or via IM) to acknowledge their agreement to participate in this study. Confidentiality was assured to the respondents and respected. All personally identifiable information from the interviews have been removed and all of the names of the respondents have been replaced with either “CS member #*n*” or “CS non-member #*n*”. The respondents were informed that quotes from the interview transcripts may be used in the thesis report but the transcripts in its entirety would not be made publically available in order to ensure confidentiality.

3.6 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis consists of a recursive process, whereby the data collection and the data analysis inform one another iteratively (Pickard, 2007). Hence, it is a process that is not sequential but moves back and forth. Adapted from Miles and Huberman's (1994) components of data analysis, Fig. 4 depicts this analysis process quite well.

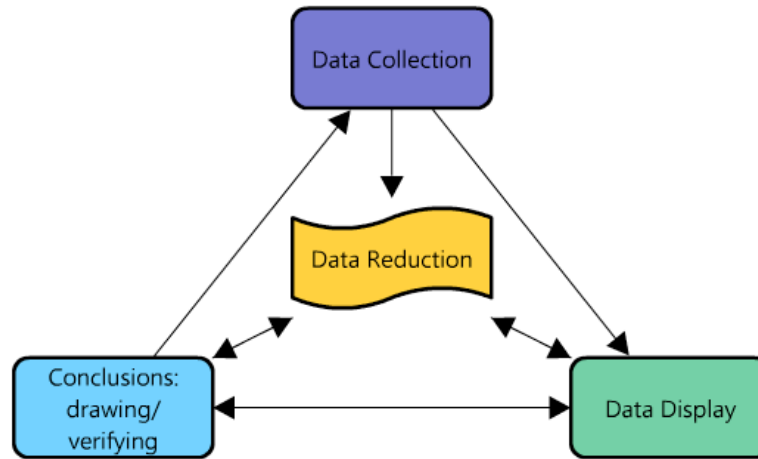


Figure 4: Components of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994)

They explain that:

Our definition of *data analysis* contains three linked subprocesses (Miles & Huberman, 1984, 1994): data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. These processes occur *before* data collection, during study design and planning; *during* data collection as interim and early analyses are carried out; and *after* data collection as final products are approached and completed. (Huberman & Miles, 1998, p. 180)

For this study, the data collection (i.e. interview transcripts) was reduced and then organized and displayed primarily with the use of a software program so that conclusions (i.e. patterns, explanations, or irregularities) could be drawn from the data, which subsequently informed the collection of new data. The subsequent sections describe the process of data analysis with the use of Miles and Huberman's data analysis model.

As seen in Fig. 5, the coding unit was based on an idea or sentence level rather than each word, since it was not the individual words that were pertinent, rather, it was the ideas expressed. That is, for this study, single words did not convey much meaning; it was the context created by a series of words that was important. After codes were assigned to the text, they were grouped into similar categories (i.e. the terminology used by TAMS is “code sets”) corresponding with the general themes associated with addressing the research questions. Developed prior to the coding process, these themes included: type of profile information relied upon by the respondents in their decision-making process, general opinions regarding trust in the online environment, perceptions of risks in CouchSurfing, and strategies for managing perceived risks.

Code sets corresponding to the four themes as well as two supplementary themes of this study are listed on Table 1. The two supplementary themes capture information that is relevant to the study but they are not directly in response to the four research questions. For an idea of the specific codes that were created and how they have been grouped into different code sets, please refer to Fig. 6 on the following page.

Table 1: Research Themes and Corresponding Code Sets

Themes	Code Sets
Type of information relied upon in decision-making process	Search Criteria Accepting Requests
General opinions on trust in the online environment	Online Trust
Perceptions of risk	Risks
Strategies for managing perceived risks	Risk Mitigation
Supplemental themes:	
Reasons for joining CouchSurfing & experiences of being a CouchSurfer	CS Membership (member)
Interest amongst non-members to join CS	CS Membership (non-member)

Codes Belonging to Each Code Set

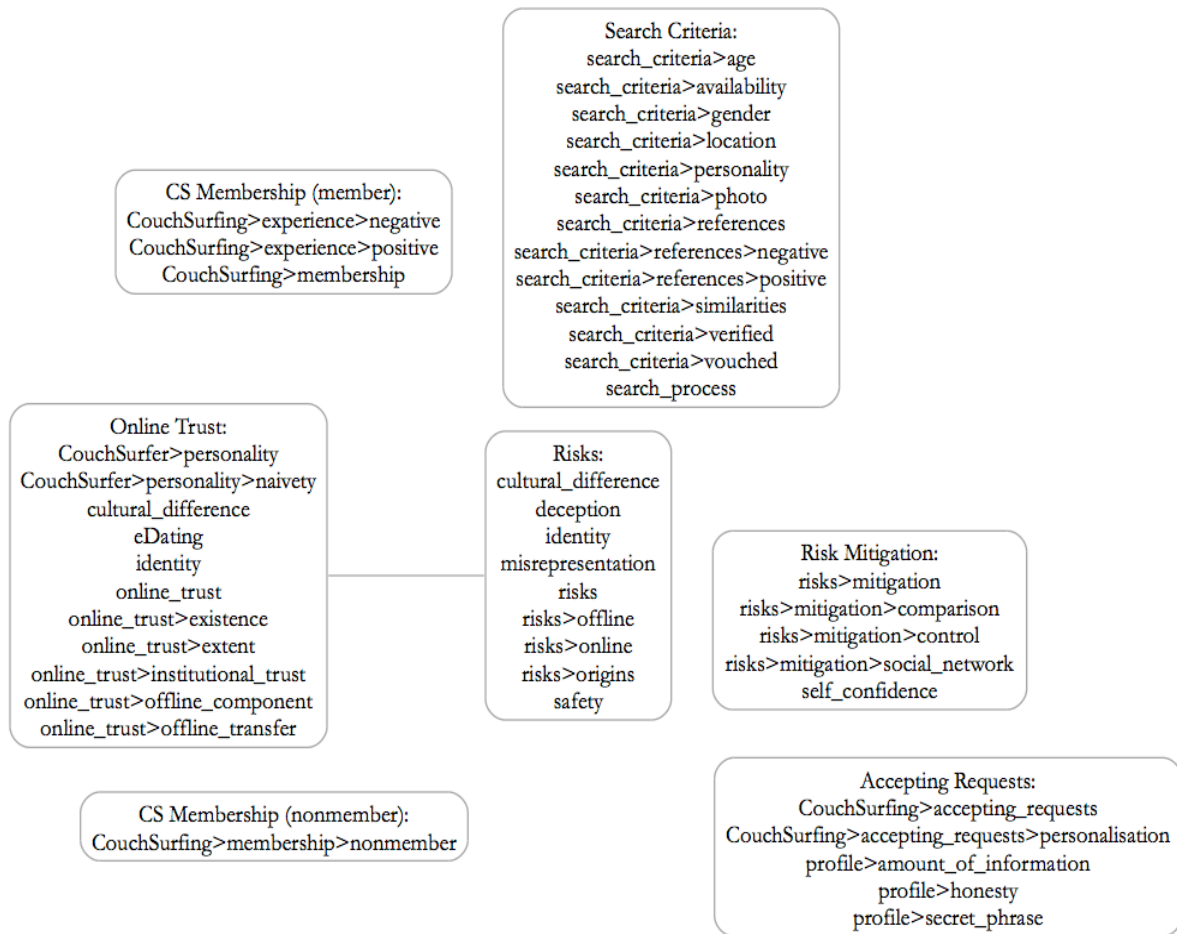


Figure 6: Codes and code sets

3.6.2 Data Display

As the codes were assigned, reports were generated so that the data could be displayed in tables. In this way, statements made by different speakers on a particular topic (i.e. code) can be easily compared. For example, Fig. 7 shows that 2 members and 1 non-member mentioned in their interviews, the strategy of using a secret phrase or special instructions in CouchSurfing profiles.

The screenshot shows a window titled "Compare data" with "Settings" and "Preview" buttons. The main content is a table titled "'speaker" compared against "Codes". The table has two columns: "speaker" and "profile>secret_phrase".

speaker	profile>secret_phrase
CS Respondent 1	In the beginning I was accepting everyone if couch was available. Then I started to get lots of requests and most of them were just copy+paste msgs (it's easy to recognize them), and most likely those ppl don't even read the profiles. That made me sad cause I put lots of effort to make my profile. So, as other ppl do, I put a kind of "password" lost somewhere. To find it ppl really must read my profile hehehe. CS Respondent 1: 20:36:40 So, if the password is not mentioned, most likely I dont accept I can accept if the word is not mentioned if the person write a very nice request (which can show some affinity). Or, even if the person wrote the word and their profile is kind incomplete or I feel we dont have things in common I decline (but more polite than my copy-paste standar msg for "no")
CS Respondent 2	9:23:28 PM CS Respondent 2: I have specific instructions in my profile so if it looks like they havent read my profile at all 9:23:31 PM CS Respondent 2: i then say no
Respondent 5	I also forgot to mention another criteria that helped sway me towards certain profiles - many people specifically asked that prospective surfers read their profile before asking to stay with them (some even gave secret phrases to add to the request email). I found that rather encouraging - for one thing, it feels less crazy to want to meet people who are curious about you than to simply fling your doors wide to the world. I like the idea of staying with the rather less crazy...

Figure 7: Example of data display (report generated by TAMS Analyzer)

With these reports, preliminary conclusions could be made, which is the next step in the data analysis process.

3.6.3 Conclusions: drawing/verifying

Although a computer program was used to help with the coding of the data, the actual analysis (i.e. developing emergent ideas and coming up with conclusions) was performed manually with the help of reports that were generated by TAMS. In addition to reading the reports, the entire collection of interview transcripts were read several times at the end of the analysis process in case there were ideas that were miscoded during the coding process.

3.7 Reflections on Research Design

If this study were to be conducted again, it may be beneficial to modify a couple of things, such as the data collection method and the sampling technique for the non-members. Instead of conducting the interviews via text chatting, the interviews could be conducted via face-to-face (if possible) or via IM audio or IM video. The convenience of having a transcript automatically generated from text chatting was definitely a major advantage and an absolute time saver but I sometimes wondered what might have been lost by not being able to see or hear my respondents. Especially since body language and tonal inflection might be important when discussing issues related to trust. However, the conversations were not devoid of feelings and emotions as the use of emoticons became an explicit way of indicating the mood or tenor of a statement.

With regards to the sampling technique of the non-members, instead of using a convenience sample, a more random sample would probably be preferable in order to avoid potential bias. Perhaps a way to do this would be to send out an email to my contacts and ask them to provide me with one contact I do not know who would be interested in taking part in this study. Or, a mass email could have been sent to students in the Institute of Information Studies at Tallinn University or other international students at the University to solicit people who would be interested in participating. However, since students are usually strapped for time already, there is a possibility that the level of interest for taking part in this study may be low if there is no incentive to participate or if they do not know me personally.

As well, if more time were available for this study, more members and non-members would have been interviewed in case additional ideas emerge from having a bigger sample. However, with the current sample of 12 people, common ideas and sentiments did emerge from the respondents by the time nearly all of the respondents were interviewed. Furthermore, since this is a qualitative study, with results only generalisable to those who were interviewed, obtaining a large sample was not a criterion that was crucial to answering the research questions. On the other hand, if this thesis were a quantitative study, then a large sample would be important. Admittedly, having a sample of 3 people might not provide a variety of differing perspectives but a sample of 12 did seem to provide sufficient data that were relevant to answering the research questions. Ultimately, the time constraints of this project influenced

the size of the sample since it would not have been possible to code and thoroughly analyze a large number of interviews within a short period of time.

A success of the research design of this study was the task for the non-members. Most of the respondents seemed to have taken the task quite seriously and felt that it helped their understanding of the CouchSurfing community. Almost all of those interviewed spent at least an hour reading through the profiles in order to find a potential host. One of the respondents remarked:

it was a very interesting task to perform. I was actually leaning very much to the very first person on the list, simply because he was so well-travelled, so eager, so many friends and experiences; also, he lived in a corner of toronto that i recognized, and could picture vividly. But it seemed wrong to pick the very first person! Anyway, it made me think a lot about how i select people, how i decide the kinds of people i would like, what kinds of things would make me reject someone.

CS non-member #1

Perception is usually clearer in hindsight but in general, taking into consideration the time constraints of this study, the methods that were used were appropriate and had enabled the collection of useful data in order to answer the research questions. In any case, these reflections could perhaps be applied for future studies on this topic of research.

3.8 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to outline and provide justification for the decisions made with regards to the research design of this study. This chapter began with a discussion of the rationale for the chosen methodology and epistemology. Realistically, a qualitative study with an interpretive approach is probably the most appropriate way to answer the research questions of this study. Next, the use of semi-structured interviews as the data collection method was described and justified. Likewise, in order to obtain rich and in-depth information from the respondents, semi-structured interviews would be the appropriate method to obtain such data.

The subsequent sections described the interviewing procedures as well as a discussion of the choice of questions that have been included in the interview guides. The sampling techniques and ethical issues were then discussed, followed by the method of data analysis and a brief

reflection on the research design. Although there may have been things that could have been done differently in retrospect, the chosen methodology, epistemology, data collection methods and other aspects of the research design were successful in achieving the goal of addressing the research questions of this study. The following chapter presents the research results as well as a discussion of the findings.

“Traveling is a brutality. It forces you to trust strangers and to lose sight of all that familiar comfort of home and friends. You are constantly off balance. Nothing is yours except the essential things - air, sleep, dreams, the sea, the sky - all things tending towards the eternal or what we imagine of it.”

- Cesare Pavese

Chapter 4:

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned in Chapter 3: Research Design, four themes were developed in response to the research questions. Before delving into the themes, this chapter begins with a brief look at the demographics of the sample and reasons why the interviewed members decided to join CouchSurfing. The subsequent section looks at the type of CouchSurfing profile information that the respondents relied upon to help make their trust decisions. Next, general opinions on trust in the online environment are examined. Then, perceptions of risk and strategies for managing perceived risks are explored. Lastly, the Discussion examines the themes in greater detail and relevant literature from Chapter 2: Literature Review is linked to the themes.

Where appropriate, quotes from the respondents have been used in each section in order to support the four main themes. The quotes by the respondents have been presented as is; misspellings are indicated with [*sic*] and missing apostrophes in contractions (e.g. won't, don't, etc.) have not been corrected. There are a few instances in which chat language or abbreviations are used. Here is an explanation of the terms:

altho = although

b4 = before

btw = by the way

msgs = messages

neg = negative

ppl = people

r = are

ref = reference(s)

smth = something

u = you

ur = your

urself = yourself

:) = smile

:D = laugh

;) = wink

4.1 Demographic Information of Respondents

Firstly, to provide demographic information on the non-members and members interviewed for this study, please refer to Table 2 and Table 3 below:

Table 2: Age and Gender of Non-Member Group

Age	Gender
late 20s	Male
late 20s	Female
early 30s	Male
early 30s	Female
mid 30s	Female
early 50s	Female

Table 3: Age, Gender and CouchSurfing Membership of Member Group

Age	Gender	Member Since	CouchSurfing Experience
early 20s	Female	2007	Mostly hosting
mid 20s	Female	2008	Surfing and meeting up with travellers who visit her city
late 20s	Male	2007	Mostly hosting
late 20s	Female	2007	Surfing and hosting
early 30s	Female	2008	Surfing and hosting
mid 40s	Male	2006	Mostly surfing but last 6 months mostly hosting

As demonstrated in Table 2 on the previous page, the non-member group is mainly composed of individuals in their late 20s and early to mid 30s, with one respondent in her early 50s. All of the non-members have travelled abroad and five of them have lived abroad for at least a year. The member group, as shown in Table 3, is mainly comprised of individuals in their 20s, with one respondent in her 30s and one in his 40s. Statistics on the CouchSurfing website indicate that the average age of a CouchSurfing member is 27 years old (The CouchSurfing Project, 2009), which incidentally seems to correspond with the sample of this study. The respondents in both groups are located in either Europe or North America.

The respondents who have been members since 2006 and 2007 have a fair amount of CouchSurfing experience, both hosting and surfing. Within this group, two members have mostly hosted but they have surfed in the past, another has equal experience hosting and surfing and the last has quite a bit of experience surfing but for the past six months have mostly hosted others. The members who joined in 2008 consider themselves novice members. One has surfed in the past but current living conditions prevent the member from hosting surfers. Instead, the member meets up with travellers who visit her home city. The other member has both hosting and surfing experience.

4.2 Reasons for Joining CouchSurfing

Amongst all of the members interviewed, the primary reason for participating in CouchSurfing was to meet new people from different cultures while traveling or hosting. Most stated that they initially joined CouchSurfing to obtain a place to stay but soon realized that CouchSurfing is much more than just getting a free place to sleep for the night. In fact, there was a general feeling amongst the members that freeloaders or those only using CouchSurfing to find a free place to stay are not appreciated.

Here are a few examples of the reasons for joining CouchSurfing:

so, main reason for that time was accommodation for free, but now i understand it is much more than that: cultural exchange, nice friends, good memories...

CS member #4

I love to travel, and i love to do it alone....before i heard of CS i stayed in hostels...but when i found out about CS i couldnt believe that such a thing existed...i guess u could say that the idea of "good samaritan" really appeals to me, and of course i realized that

because its free it will make a huge difference for my longterm travel ambitions (they suddenly seemed more real)...

i love both hostels and CS, but for different reasons...in hostels u meet other travelers from all over the world, u meet like minded people like urself, and the hostel atmosphere is very fun and sometimes unconventional...now CS is smth else, when u stay with locals u step into their world that otherwise is closed for u if u stay in hostels, hotels, etc...i think with both hostels and CS r real experiences, but CS lets u take a peak behind the curtain..

CS member #3

On the whole, the CouchSurfing experiences of those interviewed were very positive. Some of the members mentioned that they have met people who have become close friends through CouchSurfing. One member simply stated: “I have been amazed by the amount of people with good hearts”. Similarly, another member stated: “I think there are more good people on Earth than we think!! :)”

For the members who have had many CouchSurfing experiences, all mentioned that they have had a few mediocre experiences but those were the result of personality clashes or people only using CouchSurfing as a way to gain free accommodation. Hence, none of the members interviewed mentioned that they encountered any negative experiences related to issues of security or safety. Strategies to manage the perceived risks of CouchSurfing are explored in section 4.6 (Strategies for Managing Perceived Risks) but in essence, the members interviewed acknowledged that there are risks involved whenever a stranger is invited into one’s home but being able to control who to host or stay with based on information found on the CouchSurfing profiles helps lessen these perceived risks. The next section explores the type of profile information CouchSurfers use to help make their decisions to stay with/host another member.

4.3 Type of Information Relied Upon in Decision-Making Process

This section first looks at the usual process that the respondents follow when they receive a hosting request or when they attempt to find a host. Amongst members and non-members, there were particular sections in the profiles that both groups relied upon to varying degrees, depending upon the group. Primarily, these were references, vouched and verified statuses, which are separately examined in their respective sections (i.e. 4.3.2 and 4.3.3).

To provide context for the discussion on the types of information that CouchSurfers rely upon in their search, it would be useful to outline the process that is typically involved when a member CouchSurfs. The process, which has been depicted visually on the following page (Fig. 8 to Fig. 11), primarily comprises of four main steps and an optional step at the end. These steps include:

- 1) Searching for a host through the CouchSurfing database on the CS website (Fig. 8)
- 2) Sending out requests to potential hosts (Fig. 8)
- 3) Communicating in order to confirm details between the host and surfer (Fig. 9)
- 4) The actual meeting in person (Fig. 10) and
- 5) Providing references for one another once the CouchSurfing experience is over (Fig. 11).

4.3.1 Search/Request Acceptance Process

The process of deciding whether to accept or decline a request was quite similar amongst the CouchSurfing members interviewed. Once a request is received, it is usually skimmed to see if it is a generic message that has been copied and pasted or one that looks like some effort has been put into composing it. Then, the potential host goes and looks at the requestor's profile to obtain more information about the requestor. Common criteria to help determine whether a request should be accepted or rejected include: a profile that contains a lot of information about the CouchSurfer, shared interests, positive references, and the presence of photos. Similar age was also a criterion amongst a few of the members.

Likewise, for the non-members who simulated the task of finding a potential host to make a CouchSurfing request, criteria that they took into consideration were age, gender, shared interests, positive references, and whether or not they were vouched and/or verified. The reasons given by the non-members to support those choices were: people who are of similar age potentially share similar interests or are able to relate to each other more if they are in the same age group. However, one respondent remarked that most of the members seem to be in the 20s age range so it was less important as a search criterion.

PARTICIPATING IN COUCHSURFING

Bob, a member of CS, will be travelling to Toronto in two weeks. He decides to go to the CS website to search for a potential host in the CS database.

Bob sees Alice's profile and wishes to stay with her. He sends a message via the CS messaging system to make a request.

He also sends out a few more requests to other potential hosts in case Alice is unable to accept his request.



Alice receives Bob's request. She decides to...



Reject the request right away

Reject request

Accept request

Read Bob's CS profile to get more info about him

Accept the request right away

Ask for additional info from Bob

Accept request

Reject request

Ask for additional info from Bob

Reject request

Accept request



Figure 8: The process of CouchSurfing - SEARCHING and REQUESTING

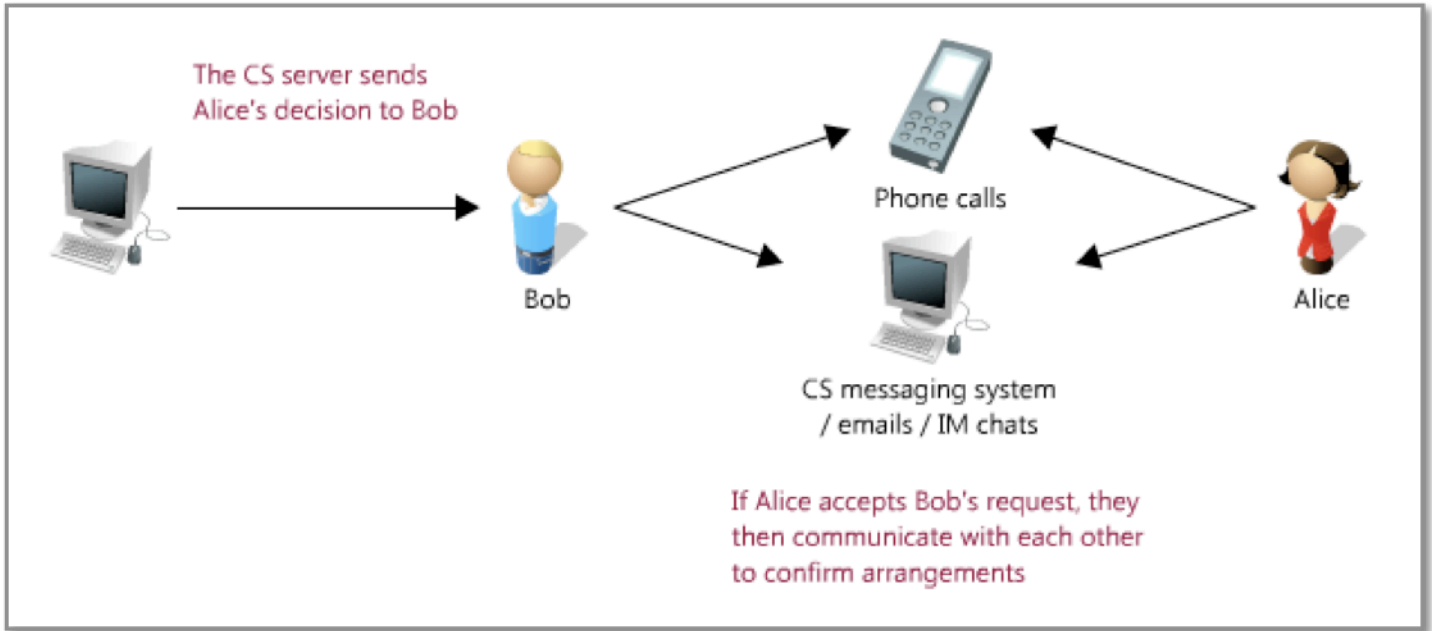


Figure 9: The process of CouchSurfing - COMMUNICATING

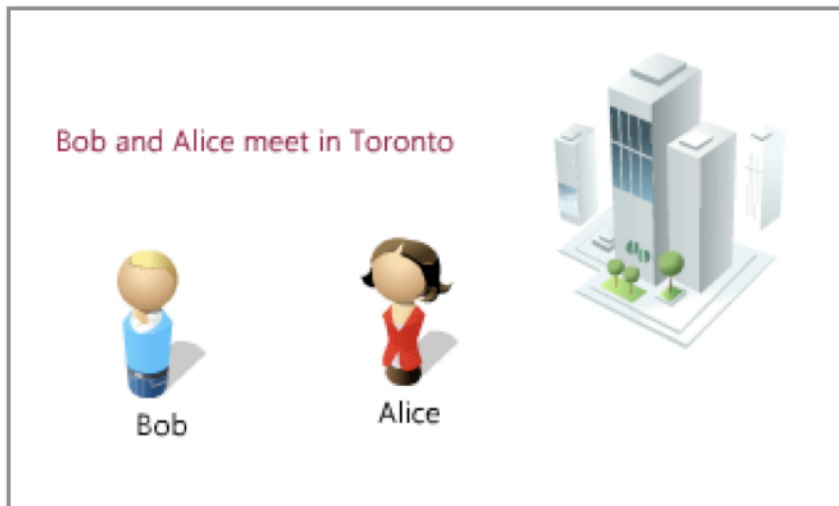


Figure 10: The process of CouchSurfing - MEETING

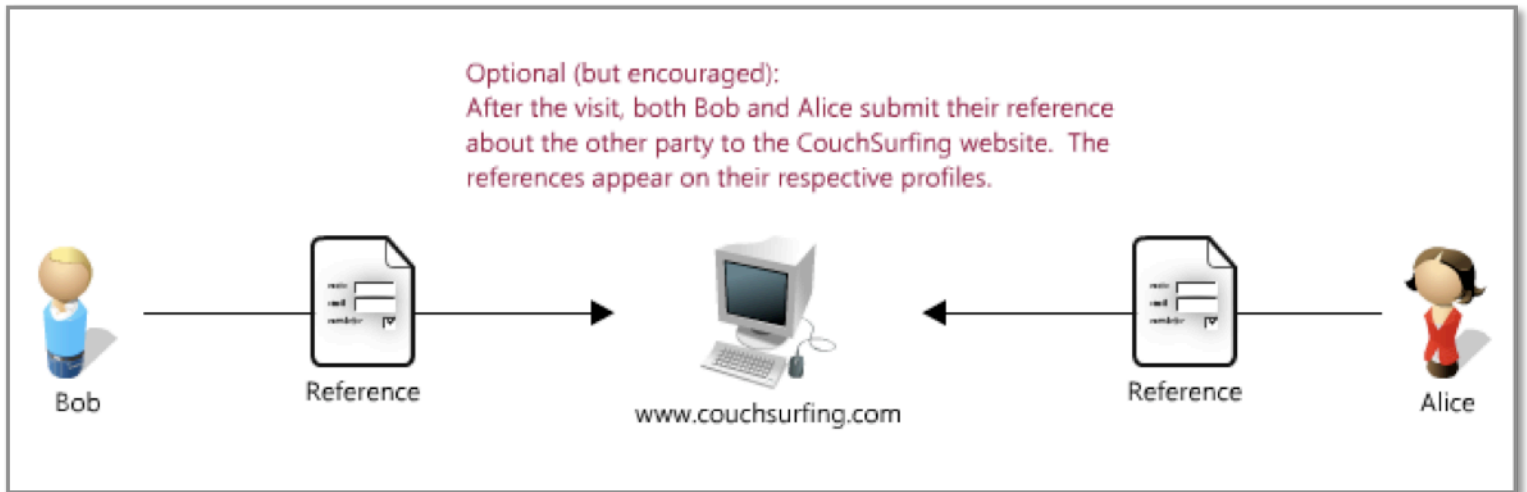


Figure 11: The process of CouchSurfing - REFERENCING

Amongst the female respondents, most of them felt that it was safer to send a request to someone of the same gender. A respondent stated:

Have we been socialized to be afraid of strange men? Perhaps. But I do somehow feel safer with a strange woman.

CS non-member #2

Sharing similar interests was fairly important for most of those interviewed, it was perceived that if they have common interests, they would have something to talk about when they meet in the offline environment.

For example, places travelled was fairly important as an indication of shared interests for the following non-member:

oh yes, i also considered where they had traveled to...because i felt it told me about the places that interested them, and the kinds of experiences they may have had. so sometimes i found myself intrigued by the collection of places travelled, because they were similar to mine, or because they had obviously traveled a lot - i guess that their destinations told me immediately whether we would have common ground.

CS non-member #1

Another important factor to help assess trustworthiness was the amount of information available on a profile. Almost all of the members interviewed stressed the importance of

having a complete profile that has been thoroughly filled out. They seemed to have invested quite a bit of time and effort into building their own profiles and mentioned that one of the criteria for accepting a hosting request is evidence that the requester has thoroughly read their profile before making a request. A few have included specific instructions on what needs to be included in a request and/or a secret word or phrase that has been hidden in their profile that has to be included in the requests to demonstrate that their profile has been read. One of the respondents explained:

In the beginning I was accepting everyone if couch was available. Then I started to get lots of requests and most of them were just copy+paste msgs (it's easy to recognize them), and most likely those ppl don't even read the profiles. That made me sad cause I put lots of effort to make my profile. So, as other ppl do, I put a kind of "password" lost somewhere. To find it ppl really must read my profile hehehe. So, if the password is not mentioned, most likely I don't accept.

CS member #1

However, for that member, if the special word is not mentioned in a request, it does not mean that the request is rejected outright. On the other hand, if the word is mentioned but the profile is incomplete or there is no evidence of affinity, the request may be declined.

I can accept if the word is not mentioned if the person write a very nice request (which can show some affinity). Or, even if the person wrote the word and their profile is kind incomplete or I feel we don't have things in common I decline.

CS member #1

Similarly, another member stated:

I have specific instructions in my profile so if it looks like they haven't read my profile at all i then say no but if their message is really awesome despite them not reading my profile then i sometimes say yes

CS member #2

Hence, in the absence of physical interaction, the way in which the information is presented and sent is vital to getting a positive response. A generic request that looks like it has been copied and pasted and sent to a large number of people is likely going to be denied. Amongst those interviewed for this study, it appears that the amount of information on a profile and the personalization of communication are key aspects that the respondents look for.

4.3.2 References

Amongst the CouchSurfers interviewed, there seemed to be a great reliance upon references to help their decision-making process. All of the members mentioned that it is a criterion that is used to determine whether they would accept a request. One of the members mentioned that when a person is expected to write things about him/herself in a profile, the text cannot be completely trusted since most people would not write negative things about themselves. Thus, references – that is, what others have written about an individual – provide a good way of indicating how one is perceived by other people in reality. Hence, the references were seen as invaluable in helping character judgement.

These [good references] add... some kind of reliability...we are like monkeys, social creatures :) so if something has worked well for others, then maybe it works out fine for me, too :D

CS member #6

However, one member cautioned that the usefulness of the references depends upon whether they honestly reflect the actual CouchSurfing experience. Another member added that if someone turns out to be untrustworthy, other people should know about it. Thus, leaving negative references is the right thing to do if the situation warrants it. The member believes that if no one leaves negative references when something bad happens, this destroys the purpose of the website.

Despite the reliance upon references, there are certain drawbacks present in such systems. One member mentioned that the references system seems to be biased towards members giving positive references instead of negative ones. The member explained that unless it is a security concern, people are hesitant about leaving a negative reference if it is just a matter of a personality clash between the surfer and host. In these cases, people probably do not leave a reference at all. Furthermore, the member explained that there is a feature on the site that asks if both parties have tried to resolve the issue first before leaving a negative reference. As the member explained:

Most ppl are very reluctant to host or to be a guest of someone with neg ref. So I feel like ppl won't put the neg [reference] because will kind of "condem"[sic] the other if nothing that could affect the security really happened. I remember my friend convinced me that the system is biased but I dont remember why, cause me, particularly never

had any negative experience. Also, there's this thing in the site "if the ref is neg click here" where there's some sort of "did u talked 1st, try to resolve the problem b4 putting neg ref" and bla bla bla.

CS member #1

The fear of receiving a retaliatory reference was also a concern for leaving a negative reference. One member explained that an unpleasant guest whose online persona did not match the offline individual basically used CouchSurfing in order to obtain a free place to stay. However, the member decided not to leave a negative reference because of the fear that the guest would leave a retaliatory reference on the member's profile. Thus, these reasons may help explain why negative references are so rare on CouchSurfing.

The non-members were a bit more sceptical of the references and although considered it a useful criterion for their decision-making process, 4 of the non-members did not wholly trust the references. As this respondent stated:

everyone seems to get good references so that makes me skeptical...I only saw a couple of neutral ones. So either everyone is legitimately great, or people aren't so picky/critical. Maybe it is, in fact, a community of likeminded people who get along well.

CS non-member #2

Furthermore, the respondent felt that the references system seems to be problematic and believes that a system that contains anonymous references might encourage more honesty. As the respondent explained:

CS non-member #2:

I think a better system of referencing might help build my trust though...Something anonymous, more standardized with a rating scale section and free answer section, and maybe that you could separate the answers based on how they know each other (hosts, surfers, coffee/drink/party, online chat)... maybe it could also be linked to membership whereby if you do surf or host you have to complete the reference (though I don't know how they would manage that)

Le Dieu:

yes, at the moment, references are optional. with anonymous references do you think there may be a chance that someone might leave fake negative references?

CS non-member #2:

I guess that too is a risk... perhaps the answers and names of people who provided could be separated, so that at the end there is an alphabetical listing of who contributed but the person doesn't know what they said???

Le Dieu:

ah i see, interesting solution!

CS non-member #2:

Not sure if it would work, just an idea against the negative fake references... so at least the person could report if a name shows up of someone they've never met

The respondent added that from looking at the profiles while completing the task, the content of the references did not seem all that useful.

A reference like, "such a nice person" doesn't tell you much anyway. So I guess I didn't find the references as is very useful.

CS non-member #2

As mentioned above, negative references on profiles seem to be rare. Accordingly, half of those interviewed remarked that there seemed to be a lot more positive references than negative references on the profiles. When probed why they thought this was so, some of the possible reasons given included: the fear of receiving retaliatory references, the idea that dedicated CouchSurfers would probably make the effort to ensure that their guests have a positive experience and the hesitancy towards being personally identified for leaving negative references. As the respondents explained:

It is possible that people who have negative feedback on people wont report it. That being said, usually negative comments are easy to dish out. I'm not sure if CS makes it more personal since you know exactly who is responsible for negative feedback and who wrote it.

CS non-member #6

There's probably some sense of peer pressure too if you give neutral or negative, it's not like it is an anonymous reference and you don't want people to give you neutral or negative back just out of spite, kind of thing...

CS non-member #2

Furthermore, one non-member remarked that even if there were negative references, it was

fairly difficult to find them, since it was necessary to click on each profile and scroll through the entire list of references to see if there were positive, neutral or negative references.

The system doesn't really make it easy to find negative reviews though... since you've got to search down the list of reviews to see if there was a negative review of the person

CS non-member #6

Hence, there seems to be a disagreement between the members and non-members with regards to the usefulness and effectiveness of the references system.

4.3.3 Vouched and Verified Statuses

All of the members felt that vouched and/or verified statuses were not essential criteria in their decision-making process. Rather, these statuses were nice things for potential surfers and hosts to have. One member stated that the verification process is a good effort towards confirming identity but it is not foolproof, it only proves that the person has access to someone's credit card and a physical address. Another respondent pointed out that there are members who seem to have lots of good experiences but are not fully verified or vouched. As of June 28th, 2009, only 86 728 out of a total of 1 212 162 (7.2%) members are vouched users and 69 309 out of 1 212 162 (5.7%) members are verified users (The CouchSurfing Project, 2009). In fact, half of the members interviewed do not have fully verified and vouched statuses and they do not seem to have difficulties participating in CouchSurfing. Thus, references seemed to carry more weight than vouched and verified statuses in the members' trust decisions.

Amongst the non-members, most of the respondents felt that verified and vouched statuses were important criteria (verification more so than vouched) and half of the group reported that they had limited their mock search to only those who were verified and/or vouched. To the non-members, the verification process was seen as an indication of commitment towards CouchSurfing as well as a way of confirming identity. Since the \$25 donation in order to be verified is not compulsory (albeit if no payment is made, then no verified status is obtained), it may have been perceived by the non-members that only those with a genuine dedication towards CouchSurfing would make the payment. As this non-member explained:

Verified was important too. Since it shows that the member is more than just casually committed to CS. Also it verifies the identity of the person, so it's just another piece of info to ensure you can trust the person and have a safe stay.

CS non-member #6

Vouching was seen as a way to discourage dishonesty in how one presents him/herself online because it is based on the assumption that the person doing the vouching knows and trusts the person s/he is vouching for.

On the other hand, 2 of the non-members, similar to the members, felt that it would be great for members to possess vouched and verified statuses but these were not necessities when they were trying to decide to whom to send their mock CouchSurfing requests. One of the respondents explained:

obviously i dont mind if they have been vouched and verified, surely thats a great thing, but i wasnt taking that into consideration as i perused, altho the system seems to put the vouched and verified people ahead, so maybe thats why i wasnt concerned. i found myself looking for profiles that seemed to come from a person who i would like, so i was reading about the person, and wasnt considering their status as vouched and verified or not. i was certain that i would pick someone who would not be a creep, so i didnt have to worry about that. so i felt neutral insofar as it certainly didnt work against someone, but it wasnt going to be a factor in my not selecting someone.

CS non-member #1

Thus, for this non-member, there seems to be a high degree of trust in the system as well as a level of self-confidence to assist in the decision-making process, rather than actively seek out members who have been vouched and/or verified.

In summary, it appears that the non-members valued vouched and verified statuses as mechanisms to help confirm identity, discourage dishonesty as well as demonstrate commitment to the community. On the other hand, the members regarded these statuses as nice things to have but their judgement of others would not be coloured by the presence or absence of these statuses. This seems to align with the fact that in the entire CouchSurfing community, only a small number of the members have actually been vouched or have opted to go through the verification process.

4.4 General Opinions Regarding Trust in the Online Environment

Three main issues are explored in this section, namely, the extent of trust both members and non-members have in the information provided in the online profiles, the perceptions of the difference between online and offline trust as well as opinions on necessary conditions for trust to occur in the online environment.

4.4.1 Extent of Online Trust

Amongst both groups of respondents, almost all of those interviewed had quite a bit of trust in the information provided in the online profiles. Most believed that information composed by CouchSurfers about themselves cannot be completely trusted but felt that there is no purpose for CouchSurfers to lie about themselves in their profiles. Hence, the presence of mechanisms such as references, vouched and/or verified statuses help increase feelings of trust, as discussed in section 4.3. For example, when asked about the extent of trust in the CouchSurfing profile information, this respondent explained:

I'd say more or less, in cases where users are vouched and verified, and have reviews and connections and such...in these cases (and particularly for the people who stress that they wish prospective visitors to read their profile and say why they might get along), the user has something to gain by being themselves, and something to lose if they're not. sure, they might fail to mention stuff like "snores like a bulldozer", but it seems to me they have a stake in presenting themselves as they hope they are

CS non-member #5

The idea of the prospect of a future face-to-face meeting was also brought up by some of the respondents. They felt that since there is also interaction in the offline environment, discrepancies between the online persona and the person in reality would be revealed via the references in the profiles. As well, as the following respondent explained, since CouchSurfing is an open community, providing feedback is not a hard thing to do:

i believe that if you want to surf and host (btw, this is something that i check - that my guests/hosts have done both, and preferably also participated other cs happenings (this you can see on the friends list), it is best to give true information about yourself). since it is an open community, it is easy to give feedback about one, and then the word spreads if the profile doesn't match with the real life

...and why would people lye[sic] in their profiles?

CS member #4

The feeling of naivety was also mentioned by a couple of the members to explain their extent of trust in the information in the profiles:

I'm a bit too naive I guess. I normally believe in what people put on their profile on CS. I had this idea of lying because in Brasil the most popular network - "Orkut", from google, there's 10000000s of fake profiles that people do just for fun or to stalk other people. Since CS is more related to a real human touch maybe ppl dont lie that much :D Also, even though the ref system might be biased, it really helps to check if ppl are ok or not.

CS member #1

hmmm....im a sucker :) but really, i trust it a lot, when i come across a profile that in my opinion is real and safe (pics, positive reviews, descriptions, vouched for icons, etc.).

CS member #3

When asked where these feelings of trust come from, the member replied:

hmmm...a philosophical question...i think u have to be a special brand of a person...like u have to believe that ppl r generally good, u have to be very open minded, and above all positive, and maybe even a little naive...and u have to be adventurous, because ur curiosity must conquer or shadow the fear of the unknown...

CS member #3

Interestingly, when the non-members were asked about their extent of trust in the information provided in the profiles, the general consensus was "quite a bit" but a few had some reservations about entirely trusting the information they saw online. The explanations for why they did not see the point of lying on a profile were: a) they would not do it themselves so why would others? b) there is nothing to gain by lying and c) others will find out via the references. As a few of the respondents explained:

On this one I'd have to say more or less leaning on the quite a bit side. Why? Hmmm, I'm not so sure. Maybe because if I were posting my profile I wouldn't feel a need to lie so why would other people. Of course people can choose what they want to write about themselves since they are really selling themselves to potential hosts, surfers and friends... so you're going to write about what you think people will find good or cool, not what you think they'll find bad or lame. So I don't think it's a matter of not trusting the information there, but rather being unsure of what the experience of having a stranger sleep on my couch or vice versa would be. And how honest and respectful they would be in real life once you met them.

CS non-member #2

quite a bit. i guess i feel that someone wouldnt bother spending the time filling out a profile if it wasnt truthful.

CS non-member #1

i dont see what's the point of not keeping truthful info, if not trying to cheat...but they havent really anything that they could win on by cheating here

CS non-member #4

...this is not really an enterprise for profit, well for hopefully a couch in another country, but i do not see why people would lie outrageously in this, what is to gain from it? Would they not be "outed" in the references? i am sure people paint themselves favourably. i think because I know it is for one or two nights at the most, and i can leave if i find it horrible

CS non-member #3

I mean, it's not like it's an internet site where you might have all sorts of online interactions but no face-to-face meetings...if your profile and your behavior don't match up at all, there's a good chance that people will call you on it in their reviews, I'd imagine

of course, if we're talking about people with fewer ties to other users, there might be more to gain by lying...but I think the vouching and the verification system seem designed to discourage extreme dishonesty in the way you present yourself

CS non-member #5

In summary, it appears that the respondents perceived that there is not much incentive for CouchSurfers to outrageously lie about themselves if they would like to continue to successfully participate in the community. Furthermore, the knowledge that there might be a physical encounter after the online interaction seems to act as a disincentive towards people being dishonest about themselves on their profiles. Granted, CouchSurfers may not mention that they “snore like a bulldozer” as one respondent explained, but most of the respondents seemed to believe that CouchSurfers do not have much to gain by making exaggerated claims about themselves. Consequently, these were the reasons why there seemed to have been quite a bit of trust in the information provided in the online profiles both amongst members as well as non-members.

4.4.2 Online Trust Versus Offline Trust

When the respondents were asked whether they believe there is a difference between trusting someone online and someone in the offline environment, the responses were mixed. Some believe that there is no difference since the individual on the other end is still the same. One member explained that in the online environment, the mental picture of the other individual is based on fewer facts than in the offline environment but that does not change the individual on the other end and the kind of image someone creates of them. On the other hand, another member stated:

i think there is [a difference between trusting online and offline]. one normally build a picture of the person on basis the information you have. and these actually quite often go wrong. i dont (really) trust people very easily (->a party friend level is not really trust). but i think CS gives enough information to say whether its ok to stay at person's place and stay there for a couple of days or not. and worst case scenario would be something like that you dont really come along together. so what, you can also move on and take a hostel/hotel. when you meet the person first time live, it will give some more info, and if it feels bad that[sic] take a hostel

CS non-member #4

Another respondent pondered what it actually means to trust someone online, since trust can mean different things to different people:

if I'm planning a trip, I'll start wondering who the person "really" is, and who all those people who friended them and vouched for them are, and what their interest is in all this...is trust believing that people are who they say they are (whatever they say), or that you have nothing to fear from them? if it's the latter, then I feel it very differently online than offline

CS non-member #5

A few of the respondents perceived online interaction as a step towards building trust but not actually the presence of true feelings of trust per se.

trusting the online persona vs. the actual person? well, it's the actual person that I'd be theoretically staying with, so they're the one I need to trust, and the online persona is just what they and others set up in order to build that trust

CS non-member #5

One member explained that enough online trust (or feelings resembling this) is built online to want to meet the other member in person but it is only after they have met, that the member is

able to determine the actual level of trust for the other person. Furthermore, the member would never provide a positive reference for another member if they have only interacted online, for example via chatting:

there is this cs chat, for example, there you can chat with other csers. i would never ever give a positive feedback for the chat partner's profile only based on how he/she is writing online (i see people are doing this - becoming good friends online... that is why i like the "have you met this person yet? - question when leaving a reference...). to host or be hosted requires way different attitude than just being funny online...

CS member #4

Several stated that there really is not much at stake while interacting online within the CouchSurfing community so it is easy to trust the online persona presented in the profiles. However, meeting the person offline instigates the need to actually act on these trusting beliefs, which is more difficult to do. As this member explained:

it is easy to trust the online persona, when u r comfortably sitting in the safety of ur home, but once u actually meet the person behind the profile u have to trust this complete stranger and believe that she/he is a good person with good intentions and will not hurt u...when i met my host in Turkey i felt very on edge, of course i was afraid...i knew that Turkey isn't 100% western and the implications it has on women, but i wasnt afraid enough...i was afraid, but i told myself how will i ever know if im not willing to take a risk and give the other person a chance...

CS member #3

Similarly, another respondent stated:

there's not much at stake for me, though, until I decide to actually go there and meet people...online, I can assume that there is a real person at the other end of every interaction. I DO assume that there's a real person, because it's generally easier than programming a computer to have a credible conversation (though this is demonstrably possible too...it just seems a little pointless in most cases).

but who cares if they are or are not who they say they are, until I'm giving them personal information that leads to where I physically am

...who cares if you tell the truth about yourself, if I'm enjoying reading a profile? or if I'm just strolling through trying to imagine how this couch surfing thing might work in practice. it's all just in my head at that point, a series of stories that I'm telling myself, with their help. not totally unlike meeting people in "real life" in fact, but even more abstract and in my head. and less risky

CS non-member #5

Essentially, it appears that for some of the respondents, it is not difficult to build trusting feelings (or “trusting beliefs” as termed by McKnight et al.) for another individual in the online environment because it seems relatively safe to do so. In addition, there was some hesitation amongst some of the respondents when asked whether or not these trusting feelings could be thought of as “real” trust per se (i.e. same as trusting someone in the offline environment). A trust-like feeling was perceived to exist by a couple of the respondents but not the same feelings of trust that would occur offline. In brief, it appears the respondents have different interpretations of how trust in the online environment differs (if at all) from trust in the offline environment.

4.4.3 Conditions for Online Trust to Occur

Amongst the respondents, a few suggested several conditions that would influence their trust decisions. For example, additional communication between surfer and potential host would facilitate the building of trust so that decisions are not solely based upon information strictly provided in the profiles. To illustrate, when a respondent was asked if it would be possible to trust another individual only based upon reading a profile, without having met the other party in person, the respondent replied:

Hmm... I think I would have to do some more communicating with them to gain more trust with them outside of their profile. I think the profile just offers a glimpse of who they are and is kind of a teaser. Like I think the people on CS are genuine. But I guess I'd need a little more communication outside of just looking at a profile and saying yes I'll stay with that person. But I think CS is set up that way, in the next step you do actually communicate with the person and arrange your stay with them.

CS non-member #6

Mutual connections or third parties were also perceived as important to building online trust. For example, one of the respondents mentioned that had a mutual friend of ours not been involved, the respondent would not have been willing to be interviewed for this study. This is perhaps akin to the “six degrees of separation” or “friend of a friend” feature that is available on each CouchSurfing profile.

i wouldn't have participated this interview if [X] (or someone else i know) would have been in between. in that case you would have been just an anonym[sic] online cs-person. because of [X], you became a true person, and i feel like trusting you.

CS member #4

Time was also a factor that was mentioned by three of the respondents. One member stated that the longer one knows a person, the more comfortable one would feel from experience that the other person would behave in a way that would not bring harm to the other. Another member perceived time as a way to discourage deception since it is difficult to maintain lies within a community over a long period of time. As the respondent explained:

perhaps time at first. if you communicate with someone in the internet or real life then in time it is hard to keep lying... perhaps for adolescents, friends would also be important or acquaintances who know them in real life and can also somehow prevent lying. it is harder to tell a lie if there's someone among the audience and this someone knows you are not telling truth :)

and of course failing new friends wouldn't be pleasant, too. and perhaps the more information is provided the more consistency reveals in web but in this case it would be better if this information would be visible for users (of CS, for instance). but not for all people. that's an aspect I like in CS portal and that also helps me to trust this portal (not only people who habitate [*sic*] it)

CS member #6

For the following respondent, time allowed trust to be either “confirmed or settled or depleted” in the example of a virtual teamwork project that the respondent was involved with:

I participated in one virtual teamwork exercise when i did the online e-learning course where the classmates were scattered through Europe. There each one was supposed to take part in the building of the website and some participated more than others

...as the semester progressed one trusted some more than others in the sense that some did their part and more and some did not work that hard and the project had to be finished for us to get grades. In the end three or four did most of the work

...well i think one started out with a certain amount of trust, because you thought everybody was there to do the course, learn what there is to learn and to participate. But lets say the trust was confirmed, or settled or depleted as the time went on and people acted in various ways

CS non-member #3

4.5 Perceptions of Risk

When the respondents were asked about their perceptions of risk associated with CouchSurfing, they provided the risks listed in Table 4 on the following page. The first three were mentioned most often and the rest are in no particular order.

Table 4: Perceptions of Risk by CouchSurfing Members and Non-Members

CS Members	Non-Members
Loss of property	Loss of property
Physical harm	Physical harm
Sexual harm	Sexual harm
Host/surfer does not show up	As a surfer, staying in an unclean flat
Wrong assessment of host/surfer	Wrong assessment of host/surfer
Not taking a risk due to the fear of the unknown	Information posted online will remain online forever
Hosting a freeloader who just wants a free place to stay	Personal information from profiles being harvested for nefarious reasons such as identity theft
Hosting surfers who overstay their welcome	
Positive risk of wanting to travel all the time	

Thus, it seems as if both groups – members, more so than non-members – mostly perceived the risks as occurrences in the offline environment rather than during online interactions in the CouchSurfing environment.

The underlying feeling perceived by both members and non-members was that the risks of participating in CouchSurfing seem to have been lessened because there are trust building mechanisms put into place by the organization. However, many of the respondents stated that it is ultimately up to the individual to manage the risks because an online service can only do so much. As the following respondents explained:

I think at the end of the day you need to be your own risk manager. You can take in everything a computer supplies for you and everything another person supplies for you, but you're the one who is responsible for you and needs to make the decisions in the end.

CS non-member #2

I think personal contact and judgement of character are probably the only things you can do to mitigate the risks.

CS non-member #6

CS has provided the opportunity, but when it comes to taking risks u r the only person who can do anything about it...i think ppl r responsible for themselves, u cant blame CS when it doesnt work out for u...

CS member #3

The importance of human involvement in risk management seems to permeate many of the strategies used by the respondents of this study. The following section explores these strategies in detail.

4.6 Strategies for Managing Perceived Risks

From the interviews, it appears that the strategies employed (or could be employed, in the case of the non-members) by the respondents in order to mitigate the perceived risks can be grouped into those belonging to the use of control (both in the online and offline environment), comparison, the possession of self-confidence and to a lesser extent, scapegoating. Furthermore, the community's social network was found to play an important role in managing risks.

4.6.1 Control as Risk Mitigator

The ability to control one's interaction with others in both online and offline environments was viewed as a way in which CouchSurfers could minimize perceived risks. For example, some members only accept requests if they adhered to certain criteria (e.g. gender, age range, way in which the request was written, if the secret word was mentioned, or the presence of positive references). For this reason, members believe that it is important to have a complete CouchSurfing profile. The necessity to thoroughly read the profiles in order to avoid disappointments or misunderstandings about expectations was also stressed. To avoid a mismatch, one respondent explained:

in my experience there seems to be at least two kinds of surfers/hosts: the ones who want to spend a lot of time with the surfer/host, hosting them for at least 2 nights to get to know them properly, and the ones who are happy just with the chat before bed time and allow one night at the time. people have different expectations about the stay, and if one is of one type and the other one is of the other, the stay is usually not so

succeeded[*sic*] one and the references left of the other may be not the best ones...so basically it is up to the profile maker to give as detailed info about him/herself together with the couch request to know what he/she is looking for (a tour guide or a couch)

CS member #4

In the offline environment, a certain number of strategies related to control (mainly from the perspective of the host) were suggested by the members:

- Do not leave money or credit cards lying around since the temptation might just be too much.
- Sometimes, hosts will invite their friends to the home when there is a surfer around or the host will host more than one group of surfers so that there is always someone with the surfer(s).
- The host might only give the house key to the surfer in exchange for something valuable that belongs to the surfer (e.g. passport, driver's licence, ID card, etc.). In addition to checking identity, this method is a way for the surfer to remember to give the key back to the host (because they will need their ID back in order to continue their travels).
- Some members may insist on meeting in public first, before deciding whether the requester will be a guest.
- One member's strategy is to advise her surfers to leave her most valued items such as her computer, untouched but they may steal the rest of her stuff and she said that she has never had anything stolen.

Hence, it appears that the perceived risks of CouchSurfing could be minimized if proactive steps are taken beforehand. In fact, both members and non-members perceived the risks associated with CouchSurfing as something that is avoidable and controllable. As this respondent explained:

on couch surfing, you can control the amount of risk you are willing to take, in a way. you can decide to choose only people of a particular gender, or only people with roommates, or only people who have been vouched, etc. it seemed for the most part that the people on couchsurfing, of the profiles i viewed in short and full versions, are positive people eager to change the world.

CS non-member #1

Therefore, in a situation of uncertainty, the members use control mechanisms both online and offline in order to reduce undesirable outcomes.

4.6.2 Comparison as Risk Mitigator

Several of the respondents mentioned that CouchSurfing is no more risky than staying at hostels or in general, letting strangers into one's home for whatever reasons. Thus, this form of risk management is to deny the risks by comparing the level of risk of one activity with other activities. Alternatively, the comparison of risks may also be seen as an attempt by individuals to put the perceived risks into perspective, rather than allow the unfamiliarity daunt them. As an example, one member mentioned that the risks of CouchSurfing are similar to the risks of Internet dating. Other comparisons included:

it is very much akin to the risk involved in getting a bed in a dorm room at a hostel, in a way. you suddenly have roommates you dont know. you might hang out with them, you might not. they might have access to your stuff. you will have good experiences and bad.

CS non-member #1

of course, travel itself is risky, and some of the risks of couchsurfing might apply equally or partially to hostels, cab rides...whatever...walking down the street is risky, if it comes to that...

CS non-member #5

I think the risks are probably the same as any other social networking site, in that you should pick your CS partners safely

CS non-member #6

4.6.3 Self-Confidence as Risk Mitigator

Many of the respondents felt that they were confident in their abilities to assess whether to accept a potential surfer or make a request with a potential host based on the information provided in the profiles as well as how the CouchSurfing requests have been written. As the respondents explained:

i was certain that i would pick someone who would not be a creep, so i didnt have to worry about [vouched and/or verified statuses].

CS non-member #1

“i guess for me i have a really good filter”

CS member #2

Aside from self-confidence in decision-making, a member mentioned that due to his physical size, he did not feel concerned about encountering any physical or sexual risks while CouchSurfing. The member added that his profile, which is quite detailed with many positive references, is useful in allaying possible concerns from potential hosts about his physical size.

Lastly, one member believed that risk is something that primarily affects new members without friends or references:

Well, you are putting a stranger at your place. So you never know... Of course the ref system helps, but i think that risk affects more new member without friends or refs. Specially because a computer screen accepts everything (it's easy to lie in a profile about yourself...)

CS member #1

Thus, this belief also seems to suggest that experience as well as the possession of references and friends minimizes the risks of CouchSurfing. Perhaps this instance could also be categorised as “scapegoating”, in which the lack of experience separates those who are considered “safe” (i.e. the experienced members) and those who are more likely to be subjected to risk (i.e. the new members).

4.6.4 Role of Social Network as Risk Mitigator

There was a general sense amongst members and non-members that since CouchSurfing is a social network of people who interact online and offline with one another (i.e. not only via hosting and surfing but also through CouchSurfing’s many online groups, volunteer collectives and local meet-ups), if there is misconduct, others in the community will soon find out. For example, a member was informed that there had been a CouchSurfer who was unpleasant, unhygienic and had taken advantage of the generosity of his hosts by not leaving when he was supposed to leave. A message of warning about the CouchSurfer was sent to members of the country’s CouchSurfing group on the CouchSurfing website to warn other members about this particular individual.

To capitalize upon this networked community, a respondent suggested that using known contacts to find trusted people that one could stay with could mitigate risks. As the respondent explained:

Well, I guess it could be mitigated by staying with people you already knew through CS (kind of like you stay at one person and then get them to refer you to someone they trusted). So you could stay with people who were vouched for by people you personally knew.

CS non-member #6

In fact, there is actually a feature (i.e. “How do you know [name of member]”) displayed on each profile which outlines – in the manner of “six degrees of separation” – how a member is connected to another member, if the relationship degree between the two members is close enough to illustrate the relation.

4.7 Interest Amongst Non-Members to Join CouchSurfing

The purpose of asking whether non-members would be interested in joining CouchSurfing was to find out if the reasons are due to the perceived risks. One respondent expressed interest in joining but the others stated that it was not in their interest to become a member at this point in time. The reasons given were not entirely related to the perceived risks of inviting strangers into their homes, although a couple of the respondents did allude to this. Primarily, the reasons were: the preference for staying in hotels, the ability to not have to socialize if they do not want to, the effort it takes to prepare the home and the need to rearrange one’s schedule. As the respondents explained:

i wouldnt rule it out, but, realistically, it doesnt interest me particularly right now. had i known of it when i was doing a lot of independent travel, or had my independent travel coincided with this time of really easy access to internet, i think that i would have been a member. but right now, i prefer the convenience of not having to worry about others

CS non-member #1

No, I don't think it is something I would want to do. Though when I read the profiles I was thinking about joining it for a moment or two. I personally like the anonymity of a hostel or a hotel where I do not have to interact if I do not want to, and where I can keep my own schedule. i can talk to people if I want to, but I do not have to and that would not be the case with a couch host.

CS non-member #3

I must confess, I was actually checking out profiles of people with couches in Istanbul...I do think there are risks, and also certain inconveniences compared to staying at a hostel, perhaps, but I'm not sure that they wildly exceed those that normally face a budget traveller. so yes, I'd consider it

CS non-member #5

I think it's really just to [*sic*] much work for us right now.

A lot of people are doing it to meet people from all over the world, but since we've both lived in a bunch of different places and have friends from all over that's not a bonus for us.

Really the only thing we get out of it is a free place to stay and a local guide which is always awesome... but then again we're having a hard time finding time and money for the invites we already have.

So I guess there's just no benefit for the risks of welcoming strangers. and the work of welcoming strangers too... means to have to do an extra good cleaning (more so than for people you know) and arrange your life around them a bit too

CS non-member #2

not really, i normally use the current contacts i have. and then i have become a little bit comfortable lately and have started to use hotels

CS non-member #4

Hmm... it's tough to say. I think I'd have to be recommended by a friend to stay at a CS'er to get the ball rolling. I think in the short term, outside of that intro through a trusted friend, it'd be a no. Not to be snobby or anything, but I think at this stage in my life, I'd be staying at a hotel or B&B first before going to stay at a CS'er.

CS non-member #6

As demonstrated by the quotes above, half of the group (non-members 1, 3 and 5) expressed some form of interest in joining the community, although non-members 1 and 3 ultimately stated that they were not interested at this point due to their travel preferences and the convenience of not needing to worry about others. For non-members 2, 4 and 6, the reason seems to be due to a hesitation towards staying with or inviting people they do not know personally or via friends into their homes.

4.8 Discussion

This section discusses the themes mentioned in this chapter in greater detail and relevant literature from Chapter 2: Literature Review has been linked to the themes, where applicable.

4.8.1 CouchSurfing Experiences

The CouchSurfing website states that as of June 28th, 2009, there have been “3,090,401 positive experiences, which is an incredibly high 99.808 percent of all member experiences!” (The CouchSurfing Project, 2009b). Looking at that statement, one can become somewhat sceptical about how close those figures actually reflect reality. In fact, a member did remark that the references system seems inherently biased towards people providing positive references instead of negative references.

However, from the findings of this study where none of the interviewed members have had any experiences that could be categorized as truly negative – in which security or safety are concerned – there might be some truth to that statement. Then again, since there are known problems with references systems, such as the concern of ratings inflation found in Resnick and Zeckhauser’s (2002) study regarding the reputation system of the eBay community, it is difficult to ascertain the accuracy of the abovementioned claim.

4.8.2 Type of Information Relied Upon in Decision-Making Process

As mentioned in section 4.3.2 (References), the references system was very important in assisting members with their trust decisions. This finding seems to align with Koszewska’s (2008) finding that her respondents also believed that references are important in their decision-making process.

Theoretically, the CouchSurfing references system could be associated with two of Nissenbaum’s (2001) conditions for the formation of trust: the first is the notion of “history and reputation”, whereby each reference constitutes a record of an interaction between surfer and host as well as an indication of how each party perceives of the other, thereby forming the reputation of the members involved; the second falls under Nissenbaum’s discussion of “contextual factors”, in which fidelity and betrayal are publicized as well as the presence of reward and punishment should fidelity or betrayal occur. In the context of CouchSurfing, the publication of positive, neutral and negative references would be analogous to the publication of fidelity and betrayal. The presence of positive references on a profile would likely “reward” the individual with having requests more easily accepted in the future as well as

building a good reputation amongst the community, while the opposite would likely be true should a member have negative references on their profile.

Many of the interviewed non-members placed great importance on vouched and verified statuses as ways to confirm identity and demonstrate commitment to the community. Moreover, verified status was perceived as more important than vouched. References were viewed with scepticism by 4 of the non-members because references do not seem to provide useful information. As well, there seems to be an unusually high number of positive references.

The fact that only 5.7% of the entire CouchSurfing membership has decided to complete the verification process (The CouchSurfing Project, 2009) perhaps indicates that it is not perceived by the members as an important mechanism to help infer trustworthiness. This may possibly explain why the members who were interviewed had viewed verified status as a nice designation to have but did not perceive it as an essential factor in their trust decisions.

In a way, the \$25 donation that is involved in the verification process can be compared to Resnick and Zeckhauser's (2002) "initiation dues." Resnick and Zeckhauser view these dues as a method of keeping out people who have less than honest intentions. As previously indicated in section 4.3.3 (Vouched and Verified Statuses), some of the interviewed non-members of this study viewed this \$25 donation as a sign of commitment. The question of whether this monetary component increases the perception of another member's level of trustworthiness is an intriguing one. While it was not an issue this study intended to address, it would be a worthwhile topic to pursue in the future. As well, this issue is particularly relevant with the emergence of AirBnB, a similar service to CouchSurfing but members pay each other for accommodations instead of a service model based on the goodwill and generosity of its members.

The fact that only a small percentage (7.2%) of CouchSurfers have been vouched (The CouchSurfing Project, 2009) perhaps indicates that the vouching system is in fact working, that is, only those deemed vouch-worthy have been vouched. This would seem to contradict Lauterbach and Shah's (2008) finding that members seem to provide vouches indiscriminately, even to those who do not have close friendship ties. Granted, Lauterbach

and Shah's study was only conducted within the CouchSurfing community in France so their findings cannot be generalised to the greater population.

Amongst Nissenbaum's (2001) conditions for trust to occur, Nissenbaum mentioned Seligman's belief that familiarity, similarity and shared values are important to building trust. Both members and non-members in this study have mentioned the importance of seeking similarity, affinity or "common ground" as they examined the profiles of CouchSurfing members. One member even mentioned that a request would be declined if it does not seem like the requestor and the member have any shared interests or affinity, even if the request was properly written.

Furthermore, in the absence of physical interaction, the way in which the information is presented and sent is vital to getting a positive response. This seems to echo Ellison et al.'s (2006) findings that online daters rely upon cues such as time stamp, writing style, and length of message to help form impressions of others in the community when physical cues are lacking. CouchSurfers seem to be relying upon these strategies and perhaps even building a set of information literacy skills and adopting clever strategies to discern those who have put some care and attention into crafting their requests from those who do not seem to bother with the effort of even personalizing their requests. This lack of attentiveness could potentially lead a potential host to believe that s/he is merely seen as a provider of a free place to stay instead of someone whom the requester would genuinely like to get to know first and foremost as a person.

Lastly, it appears that trust is not something that can be automated. For example, even if a search in the CouchSurfing database is performed with all the desired criteria, one may not end up wholly trusting the persons in the generated results. For example, the respondent who noted that if a request contained the "secret word" but the member did not have much affinity with the requestor, then the request was denied. Or, if the request was composed in an acceptable way to the host but the secret word was not there, then the member might accept it in any case. Hence, trust is entirely subjective and situational and involves feelings and emotions. In fact, in some cases, the respondents expressed that they based their decisions on a "gut feeling."

4.8.3 General Opinions Regarding Trust in the Online Environment

As mentioned in Chapter 2: Literature Review, the anticipation of future interaction in the offline environment motivated members of online dating communities to present a more honest description of themselves on their online profiles (Gibbs et al., 2006; Hardey, 2002). Although this study did not explore if the CouchSurfing members do in fact portray themselves honestly in their profiles, the findings of this study does indicate that both members and non-members believe that there is no point in providing dishonest portrayals if the lies would potentially be revealed when the individuals actually meet. Therefore, the respondents expressed quite a bit of trust in the information presented in the online profiles.

Some of the respondents had mentioned that in order for them to trust someone they have only met online, there are certain conditions that would need to be fulfilled. For example, communication (e.g. phone calls) with the other party beyond the online interaction, the involvement of mutual third parties, and time were suggested. The first two conditions seem to align with Ryan's (2004) study that found that it was not possible for an online activist organization to extend initial trust to prospective members purely based on their online applications; phone calls and/or interviews as well as speaking with mutual acquaintances were necessary. Therefore, the necessity for the presence of either of the first two conditions perhaps implies that some sort of connection in the offline world needs to be established in order for trust to occur.

Interestingly, three of the respondents suggested time as an important condition in building trust in the online environment, yet typical CouchSurfing interactions are immediate (in the sense that the relationship between surfer and host develops rapidly) and last for only a short period of time (unless both surfer and host decide to maintain contact after a CouchSurfing experience or a surfer and host decide to communicate for a period in advance before the actual stay). However, time may be inherently implied in the references found on a profile. For example, a person who has been a member for a long period of time as well as garnered many positive references over time is likely perceived as a trustworthy individual. Thus, although a trustor and trustee have not interacted together firsthand, trust is placed in the people who have vouched or left references for the trustee over time. As one respondent explained:

if I'm asking to meet and stay with a person, I'm placing my trust in someone I am going to meet...but also placing my trust in all the people who vouched for them and friended them, whom I will never, perhaps, meet.

CS non-member #5

As previously mentioned in section 4.4.2 (Online Trust Versus Offline Trust), it appears that for some of the respondents, it is easy to build trusting feelings (or “trusting beliefs” in McKnight et al.’s terms) for another individual in the online environment because the perceived risks are low. However, by the same token, if trust is only needed if there is something at stake, then perhaps it is not necessarily a question of needing to trust the individual in the online environment.

Moreover, there was some hesitation amongst a few of the respondents when asked whether trust built in the online environment could be considered the same as trust established in the offline environment. A trust-like feeling was perceived to exist but perhaps it might be considered more as reliance instead of actual trust, which is a distinction that Pettit (2004) makes in his argument that virtual trust amongst strangers does not exist. As stated in Chapter 2: Literature Review, Pettit (2004) believes that to rely is to “manifest confidence in dealing with them that they are of the relevant type or are disposed to behave in the relevant way” (p. 109). In this case, perhaps CouchSurfers are conveying reliance instead of trust when they first interact in the online environment. On the other hand, perhaps there are CouchSurfers who merely assume there is trust at the outset, much like Meyerson et al.’s (1996) concept of swift trust. So in this second case, trust amongst strangers in the online environment can be assumed to exist.

But is the CouchSurfing context one that could foster the formation of trust? At the end of section 2.3.1 (Formation of Interpersonal Trust) of the Literature Review, the question was raised whether the ability to satisfy Nissenbaum’s conditions that influence the formation of trust implies that trust is able to exist in that particular environment, whether it is online or offline. Hence, if the conditions were to be applied to the CouchSurfing context, all of the conditions could be met as described in Table 5 on the following page. This perhaps indicates

Table 5: Nissenbaum's Conditions for Trust Applied to CouchSurfing

Conditions	CouchSurfing context
History and reputation	The references system establishes a history of transactions (albeit not exhaustive since references are optional) between members and how the involved parties perceive one another (i.e. reputation)
Inferences based on personal characteristics	Shared interests, affinity and “common ground” were perceived by the respondents of this study to be key aspects on whether feelings of trust would result. The CS profiles provide a space where members can indicate their interests, which allows others to determine whether or not they may have anything in common.
Relationships: mutuality and reciprocity	CS is a hospitality network based on the concept of “paying it forward”. There is often a prevailing sense of the desire to “give back to the community” after members have a positive CS experience. Hence, in addition to surfing and hosting, members in local communities organize regular social events and meet up. As well, much of the work that keeps CS up and running, both online and offline, is based upon the generosity of a large group of volunteers from around the world. It is the online service that enables people to easily connect and build these relationships.
Role fulfilment	There are expectations on how the “surfer” and “host” should act and unofficial “rules” pertaining to each role (e.g. for guests, please see: www.couchsurfing.org/wiki/Guest and for hosts: www.couchsurfing.org/wiki/How_to_be_a_good_host). Moreover, there is an inherent understanding of the CouchSurfing philosophy between members; those not abiding by the philosophy will probably not last long in the community
Contextual factors	Since CS is a social networking service, the context of the setting encourages (maybe even obliges) the members to connect and interact with one another. The online-offline context enables fraud, deception, or scepticism to be possibly revealed while members interact. As well, the existence of the references system as well as other risk reducing mechanisms established by the organization (e.g. vouching, verification, CS Safety Team) are examples of contextual factors that help engender trust.

that trust theoretically can exist in the online environment. However, whether it is possible for trust to exist between virtual strangers in this context is another question. For those in the study who expressed reliance instead of trust, their responses might possibly be in the negative, which would concur with Pettit's (2004) belief. However, Pettit's belief that trust between virtual strangers is a fantasy due to the lack of the evidence of frame, face and personal file can be countered with the argument that these three aspects, or rather their online counterparts, are evidenced in the information provided in the CouchSurfing profiles. That is, the references and friend links provide evidence of frame and personal file, the photos and personal descriptions provide evidence of face. Granted, in Pettit's defense, his article was published in 2004, when social networking services such as Facebook, MySpace and CouchSurfing were just beginning to emerge so online personal profiles were not as ubiquitous then as nowadays.

On the other hand, some individuals might not have any qualms about placing their trust in people they have only interacted with online, since conferring trust is a highly individual matter that is dependent upon context. There are usually few people (if any) that one would trust absolutely but many that one would trust conditionally, regardless of the environment, so should the environment even matter? Hence, when one is talking about trust, it is absolutely necessary to contextualize it.

4.8.4 Perceptions of Risk

The findings in section 4.5 (Perceptions of Risk) seem to indicate that the respondents generally perceive the risks of CouchSurfing to be occurrences that primarily transpire in the offline environment. This seems to correlate with some of the respondents' belief that the perceived risks of interacting in the CouchSurfing online environment are low. Perhaps this belief is based on the assumption that the Internet affords a certain level of anonymity and the fact that users have control over the amount and type of information they wish to share and the space in which they interact. As Lewicki and Bunker (1996) believe, the ability to control a situation reduces the perception of risk. But in any case, the whole point of CouchSurfing is to meet people in person, and the purpose of the online interactions is presumably to foster enough trust to make offline interactions possible. Moreover, perhaps there are minimal perceived risks while interacting in the online environment because CouchSurfing's safety

mechanisms are effective. Nonetheless, these mechanisms are not, it seems, primarily designed to establish trust for the purposes of online interaction, but rather to establish trust via online interactions for the purposes of comfortably meeting people offline.

4.8.5 Strategies for Managing Perceived Risks

The respondents of this study suggested several ways in which the perceived risks of CouchSurfing could be managed. The risk mitigation categorisations that were used in Couch and Liamputtong's (2007) study of the online dating community were also used in this study. The strategies that were found in both studies included control, comparison, the possession of self-confidence and scapegoating.

In Couch and Liamputtong's (2007) study, they found that their respondents recognized that there are risks associated with online dating but the ability to control the amount and type of information they provide online as well as being able to screen people before deciding whether or not to interact with them, minimizes the risks of online dating. This finding was also present in this study of the CouchSurfing community. The respondents acknowledged that there are risks but they are controllable.

One aspect that appears in this study and not in Couch and Liamputtong's (2007) study was the role of the social network as a risk mitigator. The reason is perhaps the community that Couch and Liamputtong studied involved online dating services and not social networking services. The real names of the online dating services used by the online daters were not provided in the study so unfortunately, it was not possible to examine and compare the online dating sites with social networking services such as Facebook or LinkedIn. However if d. boyd and Ellison's (2007) definition² of social network sites was taken into consideration, online dating sites generally do not completely satisfy the criteria of the definition. Members indeed create online profiles and make contact with other members but there are usually no public displays of friend connections and the ability to track their friends' whereabouts and activities. This is merely a conjecture but it would probably be awkward to have a list of

² Social network sites: web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. (d. boyd & Ellison, 2007, para. 4).

“friends” a member has dated or made connections with in the past on his/her online dating profile.

Essentially, the fact that CouchSurfing is a social networking service enables and encourages members to connect and communicate with one another. Hence, there seems to be a sense that members are looking out for one another and informing each other if something unfavourable occurs (i.e. a form of self-policing). This is possible because the technical infrastructure is there for members to easily do it for themselves.

To consider this in another way, if the CouchSurfing website was to consist of only a database with online profiles containing only information that has been provided by the members themselves, without the ability for members to “friend” one another, demonstrate their “degrees of separation” from each other, join online groups, or provide references or vouches, it would arguably be more risky to participate in CouchSurfing (or at least make trust decisions).

But technology is not the only crucial component of this informal social control; it is also the culture of the community. Without CouchSurfing’s philosophy guiding the formation of relationships of “mutuality and reciprocity” as termed by Nissenbaum, members may not feel inclined to actively engage in such forms of action.

4.8.6 Interest Amongst Non-Members to Join CouchSurfing

In a question that attempted to learn about the reasons a non-member would/would not join CouchSurfing and if these reasons were based on perceived risks, three respondents (non-members 1, 3 and 5) expressed some initial interest in joining the community. However, ultimately, 2 of the respondents mentioned that travel preferences and the convenience of not having to worry about taking care of others compelled them to not wish to join. Since their reasons were not related to perceived risks, perhaps this could be interpreted as confidence in the role of the CouchSurfing service in being able to mitigate these risks.

For non-members 2, 4 and 6, they all declined and the reason seemed to be due to a hesitation towards staying with or inviting people they do not know personally or via friends. Hence, this may be interpreted that amongst this second group, there does not seem to be confidence that the CouchSurfing service would be effective in mitigating perceived risks. However, this

may have also been due to other reasons such as the individuals may not have a high propensity to trust people in general – strangers or otherwise. In any case, examining the correlation between an individual’s propensity to trust and the perceived risks of CouchSurfing are outside the scope of this study but could be a topic for further research.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter explored the main themes that corresponded with the four research questions of this study. An analysis of the data was made and presented in their respective sections of this chapter. Next, aspects of the research results were then linked to literature that was presented in Chapter 2: Literature Review. Conclusions were derived from the Research Results and Discussion and are presented in the following chapter.

“Perhaps travel cannot prevent
bigotry, but by demonstrating that
all peoples cry, laugh, eat, worry,
and die, it can introduce the idea
that if we try and understand each
other, we may even become
friends.”

- Maya Angelou

Chapter 5:

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to acquire a deeper understanding of the concept of interpersonal trust in an online community. The CouchSurfing Project was chosen as the studied community because it has an interesting trust building relationship whereby the trust feelings that are formed online is transferred into the offline environment. Four research questions were formulated to address the statement of the problem outlined in Chapter 1: Introduction. In short, the statement of the problem was concerned with the question of how people make trust decisions in a discombobulated virtual environment potentially fraught with risks. More specifically, the research questions of this study looked at the type of information CouchSurfers relied upon in order to make their trust decisions, their general opinions toward trust in the online environment, their perceptions of risk and ways of managing these risks.

A literature review was conducted in order to identify potential gaps in the literature. It was found that research in the area of trust and online hospitality networks is beginning to emerge. For example, there has been quantitative research that has explored the efficacy of CouchSurfing's vouching system as well as the relationship between risk and trust in the community. There have also been qualitative studies but not an abundance that address the concepts of risk and trust in the CouchSurfing context. Therefore, the intent of this study was to add to the growing body of literature and moreover, to provide some potential ideas for future research. This topic will be address in section 5.4 (Future Research Ideas) but prior to this, conclusions to the research questions of this study will be provided as well as a discussion of the implications of this research and general reflections of this thesis project.

5.1 Conclusions to the Research Questions

The following section provides a summary of the findings in relation to the four research questions of this study.

Research question #1: What type of profile information do CouchSurfers use to decide whom they can trust?

According to the results of this research, the interviewed members make their trust decisions based on the presence of the following: a profile that contains a lot of information about the CouchSurfer, shared interests, positive references, and the presence of photos. Similar age was also a criterion amongst a few of the members. However, if a member were to receive a hosting request, the way in which a request was written (i.e. personalization of the message and/or evidence that special instructions outlined in their profile have been followed) also influences whether the request would be accepted.

For the non-members who simulated the task of finding a potential host to make a CouchSurfing request, criteria they took into consideration were age, gender, shared interests, positive references, and whether they were vouched and/or verified.

The findings also seem to suggest that to the members interviewed, references are very important in their decision-making process. To the non-members, references were also important; however, there was scepticism towards how effective they are in practice. Many of the non-members seemed to have put great value into the vouched and verified statuses and perceived these mechanisms to be ways to confirm identity, discourage dishonesty as well as an indication of commitment to the community.

Research question #2: To what extent do people trust the information provided on the online CouchSurfing profiles?

All of the respondents seem to have quite a bit of trust in the information provided in the profiles. The fact that the profiles contain information that is contributed by the members themselves as well as others (i.e. via the references) prevents people from outrageously lying about themselves on their profiles because it is believed that the references would reveal discrepancies. Even though the respondents mentioned that people probably do not

completely tell the truth about themselves on their profiles, the likelihood of future interaction in the offline environment dissuades people from making exaggerated claims about themselves in their profiles.

Additionally, for some of the respondents, the risks of only interacting in the online environment were perceived to be low so it was easy to form trusting feelings towards another individual. However, if some scholars believe that trust inherently involves risk, then conceivably, reliance rather than trust possibly exists between members who have only interacted with each other in the online environment. Moreover, perhaps based on this feeling of reliance, feelings of trust could then emerge when the parties actually meet in the offline environment.

Research question #3: What are the perceived risks of CouchSurfing?

A list of perceived risks is found in Table 4 in section 4.5 (Perceptions of Risk) but in general, it seems the respondents primarily perceived the risks of CouchSurfing as occurrences in the offline environment rather than during online interaction between members.

Furthermore, the general feeling perceived by both members and non-members was that the risks of participating in CouchSurfing seem to be minimized because there are trust building mechanisms in place as well as proactive steps that members can take in order to protect themselves. However, many of the respondents stated that it is ultimately up to the person to manage the risks because a virtual service can only do so much.

Research question #4: What kind of strategies, if any, do CouchSurfers use in order to mitigate risks?

These strategies included control, comparison, the possession of self-confidence and scapegoating. One aspect that appears in this study and not Couch and Liamputtong's (2007) study – in which this study has adopted their categorization of risk mitigation – was the role of the social network as a risk mitigator. The reason for this omission is probably because Couch and Liamputtong studied an online dating community instead of a social networking community.

The nature of CouchSurfing being a social network helped allay fears related to the perceptions of risk. Furthermore, the online social networking service allows members to gather information about other members, read about their interactions (i.e. references) and connections with others (i.e. friend links) in order to make their trust decisions. Misbehaviour, exploitation or deception seems to be curtailed by the fact that members notify one another via the website should something untoward happen. Additionally, the fact that CouchSurfing is an Internet based community enables information to be updated almost instantly so members of the community could technically be informed immediately if incidences occur.

5.2 Implications of Research

It appears that the CouchSurfing service seems to be doing an effective job of facilitating positive encounters amongst its members, as evidenced by the high degree of positive experiences. Individuals seem to greatly rely upon the trust building mechanisms offered by the service, namely, references, vouching and verification (to varying degrees) in their decision-making process.

The online service also seems to provide suitable mechanisms in order to facilitate the mitigation of risks, such as the ability to control the amount and type of information to present to others, to search for people who adhere to certain prescribed criteria, and to alert others via the social network. Then, perhaps this indicates that the online service has been developed in a useful way that fosters an environment that enables its members to participate safely despite the potential risks. The observation that the respondents mainly seemed to view the perceived risks as occurrences in the offline environment seem to support this point. Arguably, it is in the best interests for an online service to provide such mechanisms since people would be hesitant to participate if safety measures were not in place.

Furthermore, the respondents of this study generally do not seem to perceive the risks of interacting in the online CouchSurfing environment as being high. Hence, the implications of this finding is that other similar online services might wish to consider adapting similar trust building mechanisms into their own digital environments.

Another implication of this research is derived from the finding that the social network is very important in building and sustaining trust relationships in a community. To bring this idea

into a larger context and not just the CouchSurfing community, this concept of community-based trust could be applied to other online communities. In fact, examples of existing initiatives that make use of community-based trust are found around the world. One such example is Mumsnet (www.mumsnet.com), a popular online community based in the United Kingdom that is “By parents for parents”. In a recently released documentary film titled *Us Now*, which focuses on the power of mass collaboration, Mumsnet was described as a large online community of parents (mostly moms) helping each other out by providing advice on numerous topics such as pregnancy, health issues, child-rearing, and others. The advice that the members provide for one another is trusted not because they are trained professionals but because they have experience being parents. In this way, ordinary citizens are creating value for one another. The quality of information is a concern but in the documentary, one of the moms stated that if bad or questionable advice were to be given, there would probably be 25 postings contesting that piece of advice (Hartford & Gormley, 2009). This could perhaps be considered as an informal method of quality assurance for information that is being circulated within the community. Wikipedia is a similar example that follows this particular model.

Another example is WikiCrimes (www.wikicrimes.org), created in Brazil in 2007. It is a web-based service for citizens to report instances of crime after they hear of or unfortunately become victims of crime. Wikicrimes was developed because crime data is not easy to obtain in Brazil (Furtado, Oliveira, Ayres, Carvalho, & Oliveira, 2009). Thus, WikiCrimes enables citizens to inform one another via computer-mediated word of mouth communication. With a similar principle to CouchSurfing, WikiCrimes states that: “Wikicrimes, as any system of mass collaboration, is based in the collective intelligence. We believe in the principle that the majority of the society will act correctly, and that the false information will not be significant” (WikiCrimes, n.d.). To date, there have been over 9000 crimes reported on WikiCrimes in Brazil.

In Estonia, the Estonian Historical Archives has made digital source material available to the public (Saaga: <http://www.ra.ee/dgs/explorer.php>). In tandem with the publishing of these materials on the Web, an online users forum was created to allow the users of this service, primarily genealogists, to communicate and share knowledge in the online environment with one another. In fact, the genealogists collectively have a vast body of intrinsic knowledge,

which the Archives itself might not possess. Although the Archives is based in Tartu, members of the forum come from all over Estonia and from abroad. Interestingly, the forum has become a self-sustaining community without the need for the parent organisation to provide much input into maintaining the forum. The members of this group seem to trust one other along the same model that has been identified in this study for the CouchSurfing community (R. Ruusalepp, personal communication, June 25, 2009).

As demonstrated by these examples, there seems to be a shift in relying upon fellow members of a community – that is, the social network – rather than institutional mechanisms or traditional authorities. Building relationships based on trust, whether developed or assumed, is perhaps integral to sustaining these social networks.

5.3 Reflections on Research

Although no formal hypotheses were made for this study, naturally, there were predictions. A prediction was that the trust building mechanisms offered by the CouchSurfing service would play a large role in mitigating the perceived risks. More specifically, prior to embarking on this study, I had thought that verified status would be an important factor in influencing trust decision-making in CouchSurfing, much like many of the interviewed non-members.

Acquiring vouched status or obtaining a collection of positive references might take a fair amount of time, especially for new members. On the other hand, possessing verified status is one of the few trust building mechanisms that a member can do for him/herself. Thus, it was unexpected to learn that only a small percentage (5.7%) of the CouchSurfing membership has opted to go through the verification process (The CouchSurfing Project, 2009). Furthermore, as indicated previously in Chapter 4: Research Results and Discussion, not all of those interviewed have been vouched and/or verified but this does not seem to hamper their participation in the CouchSurfing community.

Consequently, it was surprising to note that although the interviewed members did perceive vouched and/or verified statuses as useful (but not essential) mechanisms, the findings of this study suggests that the members or community as a whole, seem to rely upon the social network in order to mitigate perceived risks.

5.4 Future Research Ideas

The importance of the role of the social network as a risk mitigator was revealed in this study, in particular, its ability to enable the members to self-police the CouchSurfing community. It would be interesting to examine if in fact this happens globally, or only in certain regions. Another issue that warrants further research concerns the effectiveness of the self-reporting of incidents. For example, how common do these alerts occur amongst the community? (since all correspondence is recorded and kept by the CouchSurfing organization, this would not be impossible to do if one had access to the data) What influences members to report or not report? Can these reports be trusted? Furthermore, some additional ideas for possible future work in peripheral areas are described in the subsequent pages. These relate to cross-cultural issues, gender issues, and identity.

Currently, CouchSurfing is dominated by members from Europe (i.e. 603 145 out of 1 212 162 or 49.8 % as of June 28th, 2009) and North America (i.e. 361 829 out of 1 212 162 or 29.8% as of June 28th, 2009) (The CouchSurfing Project, 2009) but as more members from other regions of the world join, it would be fascinating to look at how cultural norms and beliefs affect how members interact and form feelings of trust with members from other regions who are of a different culture or from countries that are less developed. In fact, the matter of cross-cultural differences was an issue that was brought up by a couple of the respondents.

One member mentioned that she had tried to find a host in a city in Greece but discovered that all of the profiles offering a couch, except for one, were male. This led her to wonder about the role of women in CouchSurfing in different societies and if there are countries where certain genders dominate. Thus, it would be interesting to look at gender roles in the context of CouchSurfing and whether or not the online interaction differs cross-culturally in anyway.

When asked where this member's perceptions of risk come from, the member stated:

I think by the fact I am brazilian. Since our country is so corrupted and f**ked up there's some sort of mentality of "always take advantage of others". I was really surprised to know the community is huge in Brazil, I thought that sumthig [*sic*] like that would never succeed there hahaha

CS member #1

Thus, a study that looks at how a service such as CouchSurfing could flourish in a society with a “mentality of ‘always take advantage of others’” would be interesting.

Indeed, cultural factors play an important role in people's trust attitudes and behaviours (Jarvenpaa & Tractinsky, 1999). For instance, Fukuyama (1995) argues that societies can be grouped into “high trust” (e.g. USA, Germany, Japan) and “low trust” (e.g. China, Korea, Italy, France) societies. In general, individuals in high trust societies are prone to more readily trust their fellow citizens and believe that others can be trusted until they are proven untrustworthy. While in low trust societies, trust is placed in the groups one knows best, such as family and very close friends, instead of institutions and adherence to rules and laws is flexible at best. Thus, it would be interesting to study how this cross-cultural perspective on trust applies to the CouchSurfing context. Furthermore, it would be an intriguing study to compare how requests are written and formulated by members from different regions of the world. For example, the respondents for this study are from North America and Europe, and for them, a personalized request that demonstrates that care has been put into the request is very important. It would be interesting to see if this is also the case for those in other regions of the world.

Identity is a significant aspect of self-presentation in the online environment. Although it has only been touched upon briefly in this thesis report, it is nonetheless important in contributing to how people form impressions of one another. Thus, it would be useful to explore the extent that people manage or cultivate their online personas and how this influences trust formation.

In addition to self-presentation, a critical issue related to identity is identity confirmation, which is found in the CouchSurfing community as the credit card verification process. There does not seem to be a large percentage of members who go through the verification process in the CouchSurfing community. Further research could examine the reasons behind this as well as the role of this monetary contribution as an indication of trustworthiness. Additionally, if verification is not highly used, further research could be conducted to explore other ways to achieve this in order to build online trust, perhaps in conjunction with existing reputation systems. For example, the feasibility of using an online federated identity management service such as OpenID with CouchSurfing or similar services could be examined. Specifically speaking, the use of identity federation would allow reputation information that

an individual has built from one community (e.g. from Amazon, eBay, or Slashdot) to be visible to other communities that the user has joined, thus more information available for others to base decisions of trust upon.

In short, these are just a few of many future research possibilities to explore with regards to trust and The CouchSurfing Project.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that an environment with effective trust building mechanisms in place lessens the perceived risks of interacting in an online environment. However, it is the community's social network acting as an informal method of social control that helps foster and sustain trust amongst its members. The significance of this finding is that providers of online services keen on creating a trustworthy environment should not only consider the technical infrastructure and risk reducing mechanisms but also focus on building a social network based on trust.

REFERENCES

- Abdul-Rahman, A., & Hailes, S. (2000). Supporting trust in virtual communities. In *Proceedings of the 33rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, 2000*. Retrieved from <http://www.csee.umbc.edu/~msmith27/readings/public/abdul-rahman-2000a.ps>
- Bailey, B. P., Gurak, L. J. & Konstan, J. A. (2001). An examination of trust production in computer-mediated exchange. In *Proceedings of the 7th Conference on Human Factors and the Web, 2001*. doi:10.1.1.86.3496
- Baird, I. S., & Thomas, H. (1985). Toward a contingency model of strategic risk taking. *Academy of Management Review*, 10, 230 – 243. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/257965>
- Bialski P. (2007). *Intimate tourism: Friendships in a state of mobility – The case of the online hospitality network*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland.
- Bialski, P. (2008, December 10). Intimate tourism – back in French. Retrieved on April 12, 2009 from <http://intimatetourism.wordpress.com/2008/12/10/intimate-tourism-back-in-french/>
- Bialski, P., & Batorski, D. (2007, May). *Trust networks: Analyzing the structure and function of trust*. Poster session presented at the XXVII International Sunbelt Social Network Conference, Corfu, Greece. Available from: <http://intimatetourism.files.wordpress.com/2007/05/trust-networks-lastdraf-small.jpg>
- boyd, d. m. (2008). *Taken out of context: American teen sociality in networked publics* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of California-Berkeley, 2005). Retrieved from <http://www.danah.org/papers/TakenOutOfContext.pdf>
- boyd, d. m., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1). Retrieved from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>
- Boyd, J. (2003, Nov.). The rhetorical construction of trust online. *Communication Theory*, 13(4), 392-410. Retrieved from http://www.cerias.purdue.edu/assets/pdf/bibtex_archive/2003-53.pdf
- Budin, S. L. (2004). *The ancient Greeks: New perspectives*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

- Cole, R. L. (1973, Nov.). Toward a model of political trust: A causal analysis. *American Journal of Political Science*, 17 (4), 809-817. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2110610>
- Conchar, M. P., Zinkhan, G. M., Peters, C., & Olavarrieta, S. (2004). An integrated framework for the conceptualization of consumers' perceived-risk processing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 32(4), 418 – 436. doi:10.1177/0092070304267551
- Corritore, C. L., Kracher, B., & Wiedenbeck, S. (2003). On-line trust: Concepts, evolving themes, a model. *International Journal of Human Computer Studies*, 58(6), 737-758. doi: 10.1016/S1071-5819(03)00041-7
- Couch, D., & Liamputtong, P. (2007, Sept.). Online dating and mating: Perceptions of risk and health among online users. *Health, Risk & Society*, 9(3), 275 – 294. doi: 10.1177/1049732307312832
- Das, T. K., & Teng, B. S. (2004). The risk-based view of trust: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 19(1), 85–116. doi: 10.1023/B:JOBU.0000040274.23551.1b
- Davenport, E., & McLaughlin, L. (2004). Interpersonal trust in online partnerships: The challenge of representation. In M. -L. Huotari & M. Iivonen (Eds.), *Trust in knowledge management and systems in organizations* (pp. 107-123). Hershey, PA: Idea Group Publishing.
- de Laat, P. B. (2005). Trusting virtual trust. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 7, 167–180. doi: 10.1007/s10676-006-0002-6
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2000). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1-28). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Deutsch, M. (1958). Trust and suspicion. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2, 265-279. doi: 10.1177/002200275800200401
- Dwyer, C., Hiltz, S. R., & Passerini, K. (2007). Trust and privacy concern within social networking sites: A comparison of Facebook and MySpace. In *Proceedings of AMCIS 2007*, Keystone, CO. Retrieved from <http://csis.pace.edu/dwyer/research/DwyerAMCIS2007.pdf>
- Ellison, N., Heino, R. & Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing impressions online: Self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), 415-441. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00020.x
- Fielding, N. G., & Fielding, J. L. (1986). *Linking data*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Flick, U. (1992). Triangulation revisited: Strategy of validation or alternative? *Journal for the theory of social behavior*, 22(2), 175-97. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5914.1992.tb00215.x

- Friedman, E., & Resnick, P. (2001). The social cost of cheap pseudonyms. *Journal of Economics and Management Strategy*, 10(1), 173-199. Retrieved from <http://www.ipd.uni-karlsruhe.de/~boehm/cec05-tutorial/lit-tut.pdf>
- Fukuyama, F. (1995). *Trust: The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*. New York: Free Press.
- Furtado, V., Oliveira, M., Ayres, L., Carvalho, J., & Oliveira, G. (2009). Towards semantic WikiCrimes. In *Proceedings of the AAAI 2009 Spring Symposium on Social Semantic Web: Where Web 2.0 meets Web 3.0, 2009*, Stanford, CA.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gefen, D. (2000). E-commerce: The role of familiarity and trust. *Omega*, 28, 725-737. doi:10.1016/S0305-0483(00)00021-9
- Gibbs, J. L., Ellison, N. B., & Heino, R. D. (2006). Self-presentation in online personals: The role of anticipated future interaction, self-disclosure, and perceived success in Internet dating. *Communication Research*, 33, 152-177. doi:10.1177/0093650205285368
- Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goldbeck, J. (2008). Trust and nuanced profile similarity in online social networks. *ACM Transactions on the Web*. Retrieved from <http://trust.mindswap.org/papers/trustStudy.pdf>
- Hardey, M. (2002). Life beyond the screen: Embodiment and identity through the Internet. *The Editorial Board of The Sociological Review*, 50(4), 570-585. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.2002.tb02582.x
- Hardey, M. (2004). Mediated relationships: Authenticity and the possibility of romance. *Information, Communication & Society*, 7(2), 207-222. doi:10.1080/1369118042000232657
- Hartford, H. (Producer), & Gormley, I. (Director). (2009). *Us now* [Motion Picture]. United Kingdom: Banyak Films.
- Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Huberman, A. M., & Miles, M. B. (1998). Data management and analysis methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 179-210). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Huotari, M. -L., & Iivonen, M. (2004). Managing knowledge-based organizations through trust. In M. -L. Huotari & M. Iivonen (Eds.), *Trust in knowledge management and systems in organizations* (pp. 1-29). Hershey, PA: Idea Group Publishing.
- Jarvenpaa, S. L., & Leidner, D. E. (1999). Communication and trust in global virtual teams. *Organization Science*, 10, 791-815. doi:10.1287/orsc.10.6.791

- Jarvenpaa, S. L., & Tractinsky, N. (1999). Consumer trust in an Internet store: A cross-cultural validation. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 5, 45-71. Retrieved from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol5/issue2/jarvenpaa.html>
- Jones, G. R., & George, J. M. (1998, Jul.). The experience and evolution of trust: Implications for cooperation and teamwork. *The Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), 531-546. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/259293>
- Jøsang, A., & Lo Presti, S. (2004). Analysing the relationship between risk and trust. In *Second International Conference on Trust Management (iTrust 2004)*, Oxford, UK. Retrieved from <http://eprints.ecs.soton.ac.uk/8769/1/risktrust.pdf>
- Kamvar, S. D., Schlosser, M. T., & Garcia-Molina, H. (2004). The Eigentrust algorithm for reputation management in P2P networks. In *Proceedings of the 12th International World Wide Web Conference*. doi:10.1145/775152.775242
- Kitchin, R. (1998). Towards geographies of cyberspace. *Progress in Human Geography*, 22(3), 385-406. doi:10.1191/030913298668331585
- Koszewska, J. M. (2008). *Gift, exchange and trust: Information (its role, management and access to information) in modern society on the example of free-hospitality networks*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland.
- Kramer, R. (1999). Trust and distrust in organizations: Emerging perspectives, enduring questions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50, 569-598. doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.50.1.569
- Lauterbach D., & Shah, T. (2008). *Network analysis of the CouchSurfing online community*. Retrieved on April 7, 2009 from: http://debralauterbach.com/projects/couchsurfing_network.html
- Lawson, H. M., & Leck, K. (2006). Dynamics of Internet dating. *Social Science Computer Review*, 24, 189-208. doi:10.1177/0894439305283402
- Levi, M., & Stoker, L. (2000, June). Political trust and trustworthiness. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 3, 475-507. doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.475
- Lewicki, R. J., Bunker, B. (1996.). Developing and maintaining trust in work relationships. In R. Kramer & T. Tyler (Eds.), *Trust in organizations: Frontiers of theory and research* (pp. 114-139). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lewicki, R. J., McAllister, D. J., & Bies, R. J. (1998, July). Trust and distrust: New relationships and realities. *The Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), 438-458. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/259288>
- Lewis, J. D., & Weigert, A., (1985). Trust as a social reality. *Social Forces*, 63(4), 967-985. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2578601>

- Li, X., Hess, T. J., & Valacich, J. S. (2008). Why do we trust new technology? A study of initial trust formation with organizational information systems. *The Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, 17, 39-71. doi:10.1016/j.jsis.2008.01.001
- Luhmann, N. (1979). Trust: A mechanism for the reduction of social complexity. In *Trust and power: Two works by Niklas Luhmann* (pp. 1-103). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Luhmann, N. (1988). Familiarity, confidence, trust: Problems and alternatives. In D. Gambetta (Ed.), *Trust: Making and breaking cooperative relations* (pp. 94-107). Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell. Retrieved from <http://www.cogsci.ed.ac.uk/~rnp/papers/jcsw/trust/luhmann94-107.pdf>
- Markham, A. (1998). *Life online: Researching real experience in virtual space*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.
- Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., & Schoorman, F. D. (1995). An integrative model of organizational trust. *Academy of Management Review*, 20, 709-734. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/258792>
- McKnight, D. H. & Chervany, N. L. (2001). Conceptualizing trust: A typology and e-commerce customer relationships model. In *Proceedings of the 34th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 1-10. doi: <http://doi.ieeecomputersociety.org/10.1109/HICSS.2001.927053>
- McKnight, D. H. & Chervany, N. L. (2001b). Trust and distrust definitions: One bite at a time. In R. Falcone, M. Singh & Y. H. Tan (Eds.), *Trust in cyber-societies: Integrating the human and artificial perspectives* (pp. 27-54). Berlin: Springer.
- McKnight, D. H., & Chervany, N. L. (2002). What trust means in e-commerce customer relationships: An interdisciplinary conceptual typology. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce and Business Media*, 6, 35-59. Retrieved from <https://www.msu.edu/~mcknig26/TrTypology.pdf>
- McKnight, D. H. & Chervany, N. L. (2006). Reflections on an initial trust building model. In R. Bachmann & A. Zaheer, (Eds.), *Handbook of Trust Research* (pp. 29-51). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- McKnight, D. H., Cummings, L. L., & Chervany, N. L. (1998). Initial trust formation in new organizational relationships. *The Academy of Management Review*, 23, 473-490. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/259290>
- Meents, S., Tan, Y. H., & Verhagen, T. (2004). Distinguishing different types of initial trust in online C2C auction markets. In *Proceedings of the 17th Bled eCommerce Conference*. Retrieved from [http://ecom.fov.uni-mb.si/proceedings.nsf/0/77f8f07e2610c7b3c1256ee0002d4691/\\$FILE/17Meents.pdf](http://ecom.fov.uni-mb.si/proceedings.nsf/0/77f8f07e2610c7b3c1256ee0002d4691/$FILE/17Meents.pdf)

- Meyerson, D., Weick, K. E., & Kramer, R. M., (1996). Swift trust and temporary groups. In R. M. Kramer & T. R. Tyler (eds.), *Trust in organizations: Frontiers of theory and research* (pp.166-195). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: A source book of new methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Nissenbaum, H. (2001, June). Securing trust online: Wisdom or oxymoron. *Boston University Law Review*, 81(3), 635-664. Retrieved from <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/nissenbaum/papers/securingtrust.pdf>
- Orlikowski, W. J. & Baroudi, J. J. (1991). Studying information technology in organizations: Research approaches and assumptions. *Information Systems Research*, 2, 1-28. doi: 10.1287/isre.2.1.1
- Palmer, J. W., Bailey, J. P., & Faraj, S. (2000, March). The role of intermediaries in the development of trust on the WWW: The use and prominence of trusted third parties and privacy statements. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 5(3). Retrieved from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol5/issue3/palmer.html>
- Pavlou, P. A. (2002). Institution-based trust in interorganizational exchange relationships: The role of online B2B marketplaces on trust formation. *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, 11, 215-43. doi:10.1016/S0963-8687(02)00017-3
- Pavlou, P. A., & Gefen, D. (2004). Building effective online marketplaces with institution-based trust. *Information Systems Research*, 15, 37–59. doi: 10.1287/isre.1040.0015
- Pay it forward. (2009, May 27). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 22:30, May 27, 2009, from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Pay_it_forward&oldid=292761512
- Pettit, P. (1995). The cunning of trust. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 24, 202-225. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2961900>
- Pettit, P. (2004). Trust, reliance and the Internet. *Analyse und Kritik*, 26, 108–121. Retrieved from http://www.analyse-und-kritik.net/2004-1/AK_Pettit_2004.pdf
- Piccoli, G., & Ives, B. (2003). Trust and the unintended effects of behavior control in virtual teams. *MIS Quarterly*, 27, 365-395. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036538>
- Pickard, A. J. (2007). *Research methods for information*. London: Facet Publishing.
- Poster, M. (1995). *Postmodern virtualities*. Retrieved on April 23, 2009 from <http://www.hnet.uci.edu/mposter/writings/internet.html>
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American communities*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Resnick, P., & Zeckhauser, R. (2002). Trust among strangers in Internet transactions: Empirical analysis of eBay's reputation system. In M. R. Baye (Ed.), *The Economics of the Internet*

- and *E-Commerce* (pp. 127-157). Amsterdam: Elsevier Science. Retrieved from <http://www.si.umich.edu/presnick/papers/ebayNBER/RZNBERBodegaBay.pdf>
- Resnick, P., Zeckhauser, R., Friedman E. & Kuwabara, K. (2000). Reputation systems: Facilitating trust in Internet interactions. *Communications of the ACM*, 43 (12), 45-48. doi: <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/355112.355122>
- Riegelsberger, J., Sasse, M. A., McCarthy, J. D. (2003). The researcher's dilemma: Evaluating trust in computer-mediated communication. *International Journal of Human Computer Studies*, 58 (6), 759-781. doi:10.1016/S1071-5819(03)00042-9
- Riegelsberger, J., Sasse, M. A., McCarthy, J. D. (2005). The mechanics of trust: A framework for research and design. *International Journal of Human Computer Studies*, 62 (3), 381-422. doi:10.1016/j.ijhcs.2005.01.001
- Ritchie, J., Lewis J., & Elam, G. (2003) Designing and selecting samples. In J. Ritchie & J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (pp. 77-108). London: Sage.
- Rotter, J. B. (1967). A new scale for the measurement of interpersonal trust. *Journal of Personality*, 35, 651-665. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6494.1967.tb01454.x
- Rotter, J. B. (1971). Generalized expectancies for interpersonal trust. *American Psychologist*, 26, 443-452.
- Rousseau, D. M., Sitkin, S. B., Burt, R. S., & Camerer, C. (1998, Jul.). Introduction to special topic forum: Not so different after all: A cross-discipline view of trust. *The Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), 393-404. Retrieved from http://portal.psychology.uoguelph.ca/coursenotes/gill/7140/WEEK_3_Jan.25/Rousseau,%20Sitkin,%20Burt,%20&%20Camerer_AMR1998.pdf
- Ryan, S. (2004). *Initial trust formation in an online social action network*. Paper presented at Contesting Citizenship and Civil Society in a Divided World, Toronto, Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.istr.org/conferences/toronto/workingpapers/ryan.sherida.pdf>
- Seligman, A. B. (1997). *The problem of trust*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Snape, D., & Spencer, L. (2003). The foundations of qualitative research. In J. Ritchie & J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (pp. 1-23). London: Sage.
- Sutcliffe, A. (2006). Trust: From cognition to conceptual models and design. In *Advanced information systems engineering* (pp. 3-17). Heidelberg: Springer Berlin. doi: 10.1007/11767138
- The CouchSurfing Project. (n.d.). *CouchSurfing – CouchSurfing 2.0 project: Our mission*. Retrieved February 27, 2009, from <http://www.couchsurfing.org/mission.html>
- The CouchSurfing Project. (2009). *CouchSurfing – Statistics*. Retrieved June 28, 2009, from <http://www.couchsurfing.org/statistics.html>

- The CouchSurfing Project. (2009b). *CouchSurfing – One couch at a time*. Retrieved June 28, 2009, from http://www.couchsurfing.org/mission_stats.html
- Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Walsham, G. (1995, Dec.). The emergence of interpretivism in IS research. *Information Systems Research*, 6(4), 376- 394. doi:10.1287/isre.6.4.376
- Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research*, 23, 3–43. doi: 10.1177/009365096023001001
- Wang, W., & Benbasat, I. (2007). Recommendation agents for electronic commerce: Effects of explanation facilities on trusting beliefs. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 23, 217-246. doi:10.2753/MIS0742-1222230410
- WikiCrimes. (n.d.). *FAQ*. Retrieved June 22, 2009, from <http://www.wikicrimes.org/perguntasFrequentes.html#faq9>
- Xu, Y. & Kim, H-W. (2003). Trust research in the transactional context and its implications for online trust. In *PACIS 2003 Proceedings. Paper 102*. Retrieved from <http://www.pacis-net.org/file/2003/papers/e-business/117.pdf>
- Yu, B. & Singh, M. (2002). Distributed reputation management for electronic commerce. *Computational Intelligence*, 18(4), 535-549. doi:10.1111/1467-8640.00202

Appendix 1:

COUCHSURFING (member) INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were your reasons for joining CouchSurfing?
2. Are your CouchSurfing experiences mostly comprised of surfing or hosting?
3. How have your experiences been as a surfer?
4. As a surfer, please describe the usual process that you go through when you are looking for a potential host.
5. How have your experiences been as a host?
6. As a host, please describe the usual process that you go through when you receive a request to host (i.e. how do you determine whether or not you will accept the request).
7. In general, have you had any negative experiences?
8. How important are references when deciding who you would like to host or stay with? (not important - less important - neutral - important - very important). Please explain the reason for your answer.
9. Do you take into consideration vouched or verification statuses?
10. What part of a profile do you depend on the most when you attempt to decide whether or not to host or stay with someone?
11. To what extent do you trust the information that you see in the profiles? (not at all - a bit - more or less - quite a bit - a lot) Please explain the reason for your answer
12. In your opinion, where do these feelings of trust come from?
13. Do you think there's a difference between trusting the online persona that you see on the CS website and the actual person?
14. Once you meet in the physical world, does the initial trust that you have built online change?
15. What do you believe are the main risks of CouchSurfing?

16. In your opinion, where do you think these perceptions of risk come from?
17. Do you try to manage these risks? If yes, how?
18. Do you think that the CouchSurfing service/virtual environment helps to manage these risks? If yes, how?
19. Can you trust a virtual service or a computer to solve the risks for you, or do you think a human counterpart is needed to deal with your risk management?

Appendix 2:

COUCHSURFING (non-member) TASK & INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

What am I doing?

I am attempting to study the issue of trust in online social networking communities, in particular the CouchSurfing community (www.couchsurfing.com). CouchSurfing is an online hospitality network where members offer a free place to stay to other members who are travelling. In a way, this promotes cultural exchange and is an opportunity for travellers to meet local people.

As part of my research project, I will be interviewing members of CouchSurfing about their experiences, their perceptions on the types of risks involved with CouchSurfing and how these risks are managed. I am also interested in talking with non-members about their opinions regarding CouchSurfing because it would be useful to learn from people who aren't already "sold" on the CouchSurfing concept. So this is where you come in... 😊

What will you be doing?

To give you an idea of what CouchSurfing is about, please look through the subsequent pages to provide you with a bit of background on how one participates in CouchSurfing as well as the security measures in place. Feel free to browse the CouchSurfing site as well. Afterwards, you will be given a task to complete, followed by a brief interview that will be conducted over Skype/MSN.

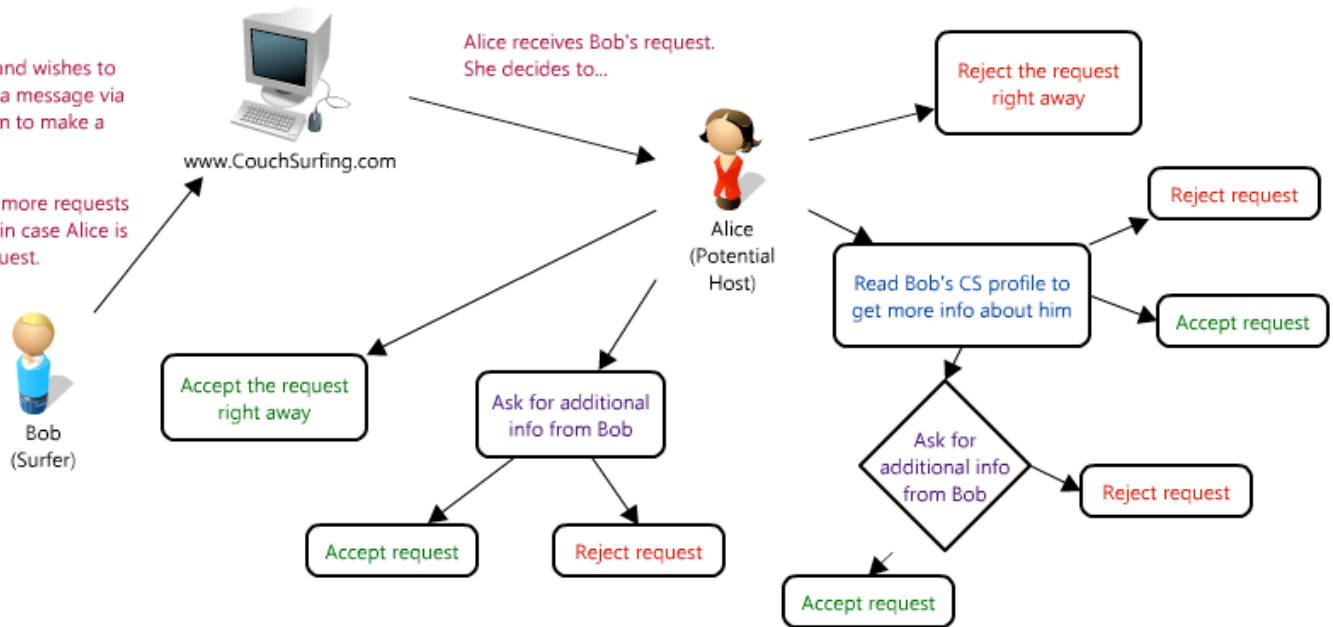
Privacy and confidentiality are very important to me so although some of your responses may appear in my thesis, no personal identifiable information will be included.

Bob, a member of CS, will be travelling to Toronto in two weeks. He decides to go to the CS website to search for a potential host in the CS database.

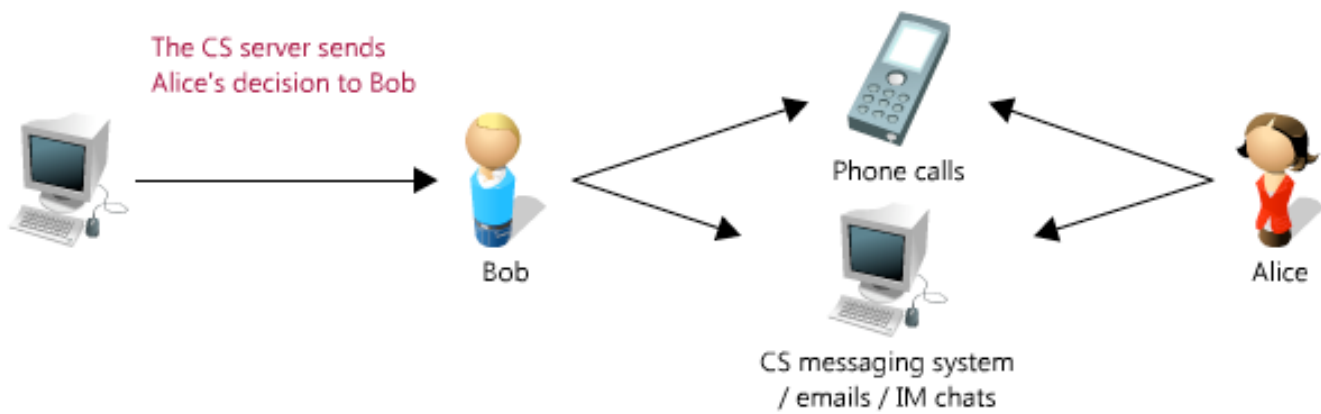
Bob sees Alice's profile and wishes to stay with her. He sends a message via the CS messaging system to make a request.

He also sends out a few more requests to other potential hosts in case Alice is unable to accept his request.

PARTICIPATING IN COUCHSURFING



COMMUNICATING



If Alice accepts Bob's request, they then communicate with each other to confirm arrangements

MEETING

Bob and Alice meet in Toronto



REFERENCES

Optional (but encouraged):
After the visit, both Bob and Alice submit their reference about the other party to the CouchSurfing website. The references appear on their respective profiles.



SAFETY MECHANISMS

To help build trust, there are a few safety measures that the organization has put into place:

Archived correspondence

When members send messages to other members via the internal messaging system to make a CouchSurfing request or to communicate on other matters, this correspondence is recorded and kept in case it needs to be referred to in the event of a safety related incident.

References

The references system allows members to leave positive/negative/neutral references for each other on their respective profiles. It is not mandatory for members to leave a reference after each visit/hosting experience but it is encouraged. Members are not able to remove references from their profiles so that other members can have an idea of how a particular person may be like.

Friend Network

Like other social networking communities such as Facebook or MySpace, CouchSurfers can show their connections with other CouchSurfers by “friending” one another. In CouchSurfing, when members add a friend to their network, they are asked to specify their level of friendship with the other person, which appears on the profiles. There is a choice of 7 levels of friendship: Haven’t met yet, Acquaintance, CouchSurfing Friend, Friend, Good Friend, Close Friend, and Best Friend. As well, members are asked to indicate their “Trust Degree” for the other person (i.e. I don’t know this person well enough to decide, I don’t trust this person, I trust this person somewhat, I generally trust this person, I highly trust this person, I would trust this person with my life), however, this information does not appear on the profiles.



“Vouched” member

In order to receive the status of a “vouched” member, a member has to be vouched by at least three other members who themselves have already been vouched. CouchSurfing advises their members to only vouch for people they have met in person and whom they trust.



“Verified” member

To become a “verified” member, this involves a \$25 donation to the organization via a credit card payment so that one’s real name and address can be verified with a credit card company. Subsequently, a postcard with a verification code is sent to the individual, which is then entered into the CouchSurfing website in order to complete the verification process. There are 3 levels of verification, if they have reached the 3rd level, this means that they are fully verified.

TASK

You will be travelling to Toronto, Canada and have decided to use CouchSurfing. Please use the CouchSurfing website to search for a profile of an individual that you would be comfortable with making an accommodation request.

Instructions:

1. Please go to the following site in order to search the CouchSurfing database:
<http://www.couchsurfing.com/mapsurf.html>
2. Select: “Yes or Definitely” under “Has Couch?”
3. Optional: If you wish, make any other selections on the form (i.e. if you are using Advanced Search) and make a note of the additional criteria that you have chosen.
4. Enter “Toronto, Canada” under “Location by text entry”
5. Select a profile. No worries if you find it difficult to decide on only one profile because I’m more interested in the choices and decisions that you have made while you are searching. So it’s ok if you find that you have more than one profile because in a real CouchSurfing situation, you will likely be sending requests to several people.
6. A follow-up interview will be conducted via chatting over Skype/MSN regarding the choices that you have made as well as your opinions on CouchSurfing and other similar services in general. This interview will probably last for about 1.5 to 2 hours.



**Thank you for your
participation!!**

INTERVIEW WITH NON-MEMBERS

1. Which profile did you choose? Please explain why you have chosen the profile.
2. While you were filling out the form to search, did you select any additional criteria? If so, which ones and why?
3. How important were the following as you were deciding who you would like to stay with? I will provide you with the categories, please indicate whether it is (not important - less important - neutral - important - very important) and the reason for your choice.
Age / Gender / Type of references received / If they have been vouched / If they have been verified / Shared interests / Photo included on profile / location / Other (please specify)
4. As you were looking through the profiles, were there certain parts of the profile that you found yourself relying upon the most in your decision-making process? Please explain your answer.
5. To what extent do you trust the information that you see in the profiles?
(not at all - a bit - more or less - quite a bit - a lot) Please explain why.
6. In your opinion, what are the main risks of participating in CouchSurfing?
7. Do you think that the CouchSurfing service/virtual environment helps to manage these risks? How?
8. Can you trust a virtual service to solve the risks for you, or do you think a human counterpart is needed to deal with your risk management?
9. Would you consider becoming a CouchSurfing member? Why or why not?
10. (If not) What assurances need to be in place for you to join CouchSurfing?
11. Do you have any experiences with other online services that resemble the trust relationship found in CouchSurfing? (e.g. online auctions such as eBay, online dating, Peer-to-Peer file sharing/torrents, virtual teamwork amongst strangers, etc.)
12. What possible parallels can you draw between the services that you have used and CouchSurfing?