BUILDING TRUST IN
ELECTRONIC-TO-FACE SOCIAL NETWORK SITES:
CASE STUDY OF COUCHSURFING.ORG

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the process of trust-building on electronic-to-face Social Network Sites (e2f-SNSs), where users first connect online and then extend the connection to the offline realm. Using CouchSurfing.org as a case study, I investigate how users of an e2f-SNS utilize tools given by the platform to build sufficient trust to initiate face-to-face interactions.

CouchSurfing.org is a platform that connects travellers and locals, to match them up for free accommodation offered by the locals. Since most of these connections are fostered between complete strangers, trust issues are salient. How do people manage to achieve the level of trust to host strangers in their homes, or meet strangers in a completely foreign territory? In a pool of potential hosts and guests, how do users choose who to host and who to surf with? What do people look for in the interaction online, to be able to make the decision to make a face-to-face connection?

The research methods that I used are participant observation, interviews and cyber ethnography. Key concepts were synthesized from different disciplines, including the theoretical framework of trust by Möllering (2001, 2006), as well as multiple perspectives on research areas such as Social Network Sites (works by boyd, Ellison, Lampe, Donath, Steinfeld, etc.), subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996), reflexive cosmopolitanism (Kendall, Woodward and Skrbis, 2009), and presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). Analyzing the findings from the field, I first demarcate the niche of e2f-SNSs, and explain their key features that are conducive to building trust: through online profiles, trust mechanisms, a matching system for members to achieve instrumental goals, and a strong virtual community. Because trust is highly contextual and interpretative, I describe the nuances and idiosyncrasies of trust as gleaned from the interview respondents.

The thesis argues that user-to-user trust is built through trustors forming narratives of trustworthiness, from information gathered from the e2f-SNS platform. These narratives are about the potential interactions, in judging the person who is on the other end of the interaction, and the match between the trustor and trustee in an offline setting. The narratives are used to aid the trustors in overcoming irreducible uncertainty and make the leap of faith from online interactions to offline encounters. There are two angles from which I analyze narratives of trustworthiness: the factors

that form the narratives, and the strategies that users employ to create and decipher them.

At the macro level, the presence of a metanarrative creates the imagination of a community of trustworthy travellers, and perpetuates the social norms of how members of the community should interact with one another. At the micro level, the narratives are shaped through individual, idiosyncratic perceptions of risk and expected outcomes of the interactions. On e2f-SNSs, users are offered an array of features and tools to build the narratives, through sending and interpreting signals of purposeful presentation of self. Through impression management in a way that reflects traits deemed important by the community, users accumulate subcultural capital in embodied and objectified forms, so that they come across as trustworthy members of the community who understand the rules of engagement. Trustees manage their impression to help trustors build favourable narratives, while trustors gather information to form an impression of the trustees to decide whether they should meet or not.

In 2008, at the commencement of my research, CouchSurfing.org had about 500,000 members; in 2013 it has close to 6 million members, an increment of more than tenfold. Within these five years, CouchSurfing.org underwent a drastic transformation. In the thesis, I document the development of events as it unfolded, from the days of a strong community and vibrant volunteering culture, to beyond CouchSurfing International's conversion to a for-profit organization. I found that most CouchSurfing members were relatively impervious towards the alleged trust violations and controversies of CouchSurfing International at first, although there were expressions of dissent from a group of active members. However, the change of direction of the organization towards a focus on activities and events (i.e. taking the emphasis off hosting and surfing) and a rapid expansion of member base slowly diluted the strong metanarrative. Subsequent technical changes implemented on the forums and matching system adversely affected the trust-building processes, by disrupting the virtual community and its generation of social norms, and upsetting the host/surfer dynamics.

This study will benefit the field of social media studies that focus on hybrid online/offline communities, and studies of interpersonal trust online. Through first explaining how trust is built, and then demonstrating the real world implications when these processes are disrupted, I argue that the success of an e2f-SNS depends on its

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technological affordances to facilitate the building of narratives of trustworthiness. This can be accomplished through capturing the essence of the community and propagating its metanarrative, and supporting the users' creation of narratives through distilling relevant information of their expectations and circumstances. The e2f-SNS succeeds when it is able to build trust and make good matches between users for a satisfactory offline experience.

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

"CouchSurfing.org is a website that travellers use to find locals who would host them for free for a few nights."

This is a well-rehearsed line that I start with, when I talk about my research.

"I'm using it as a case to study the Internet and trust."

"But isn't that really dangerous?" "Is it safe to stay at a stranger's place?" "What if you get robbed, or raped, or killed, or all of the above?" These are the typical questions that follow, once my conversation partner understands the modus operandi of CouchSurfing. (You ask someone over the Internet for a place to stay for a few nights in a foreign city, they say yes, and you turn up with your luggage in tow and some gifts for your new friend.) From the reactions of the average person, it is clear that conventional wisdom dictates that one does not speak to strangers, much less go for sleepovers with them in an unfamiliar city. Along a similar vein, it also seems unfathomable that someone can open his/her doors and offer hospitality to someone they have never met before. "What if this person takes off with your big screen TV?"

Apart from the curious fixation with big screen TVs, the same questions intrigue me. In the (southern hemispheric) summer of 2008, I first encountered this website while travelling in New Zealand. A combination of curiosity and budget constraints led me to submit my first requests to the friendly locals of Christchurch, to house me and my friend Val for one night. That night we slept in the living room of a man named Shane, along with two other CouchSurfers. The second day we moved on to the next city, thrilled and rather incredulous that no one got robbed or killed. Emboldened, we continued to do it in Dunedin. Since then, I have couchsurfed, with a partner or alone, in 23 different cities (or towns and villages) all over the world, across 10 countries. From the hustle and bustle of Chennai, to a sleepy little English village called Harpley (population: 300), kindly people opened their doors to me and my grubby backpack. I have enjoyed the hospitality of a 70-year-old British war veteran, a Dutch comedian, an Indian dancer, an Austrian single mother, a Malaysian Chinese tea master… among many other interesting personalities. Accommodation has ranged from couches in messy student flats littered with empty beer cans to lovely guest bedrooms with towels provided. Later on, when conditions permitted, I started opening up my home to strangers too.

Most of these experiences have been quite positive, some more than others. The immense amount of trust involved never ceases to amaze me - how does this work? As a student in communication studies, I am interested in the interactions and the platform that enables them. How is it that the platform is able to facilitate the trust that is prerequisite to a face-to-face meeting of complete strangers? How do the people use the tools provided by websites like CouchSurfing.org to build trust? Thus, while embarking on my doctoral studies, the issue of trust-building in CouchSurfing.org and similar social network sites that facilitate offline encounters framed the question that I would ask. At a scholastic level, I discovered an interesting phenomenon that warranted further research, to contribute to the field of communication. At a personal level, this study embodied my fascination towards the altruistic and trusting aspect of humanity, as well as the passion for travelling and research.

Significance and Relevance of Study

This is a case study that is interesting from multiple perspectives, spreading across multiple disciplines and linking up multiple stakeholders. A new niche of Social Network Sites is proposed and dissected to find out how people build trust on platforms like CouchSurfing.org. Theoretical perspectives are drawn from a wide spectrum of studies (ranging from trust to social psychology and subcultures). In terms of theoretical contributions, this study will benefit the field of social media studies that focus on hybrid online/offline communities, and studies of interpersonal trust online. The in-depth analysis of the historical development of CouchSurfing.org will also provide valuable documentation for scholars on the topical area of CouchSurfing or hospitality exchange networks in general.
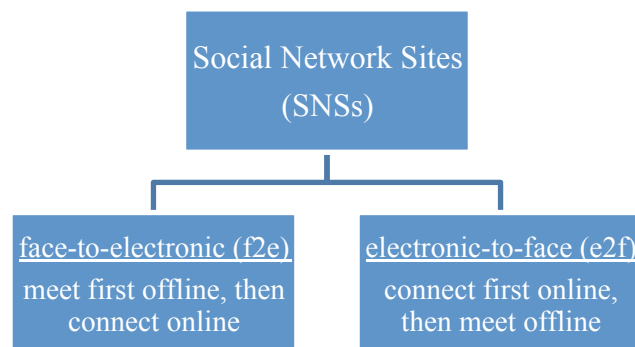
Figure 1-1 Simple classification of SNSs

As depicted in Figure 1.1, I propose to split the area of Social Network Sites into two types: face-to-electronic (f2e) and electronic-to-face (e2f). Prevalent studies on SNSs focus very much on the direction of connectivity being from offline to online, i.e. face-to-electronic (f2e). Two people first meet in real life, and then make friendship links on the SNS, such as usually happens with Facebook. The case of a different type of SNS, the electronic-to-face (e2f) variation – where the connection is first made online and then the two people meet face-to-face – is lacking in the literature. Even when scholars look at the situation where people connect with a stranger online through an f2e-SNS, it is still based on looking at trust that is associated with one's friend-of-a-friend (that is to say, I will be able to extend the trust towards my friend, to her friend). Chapter 2 elaborates on these studies. I argue that the issue of trust on e2f-SNSs is quite different from that of f2e-SNSs. The purposes served by each SNS type are quite different: the f2e-SNS enables the users to map out their offline connections, while the e2f-SNS is purposely built to make new connections that lead to offline encounters. Hence, they have different characteristics, functions and trust mechanisms. This warrants an in-depth inquiry.

Secondly, this study draws from and contributes to existing perspectives of trust-building in SNSs by viewing them in a holistic framework. While other scholars have worked on social cues and theories of signalling and presentation of self online (see Chapter 2), they provide a fragmented view. By demonstrating that actors pick and choose from different trust mechanisms (such as community-level reputation systems, or user-to-user level impression management) to form narratives of trustworthiness, I integrate these studies into a larger picture, which is able to address idiosyncrasies of trusting behaviour and generalize them at a theoretical level. Studying CouchSurfing.org as a case of e2f-SNSs, I look at both the macro and the micro level of trust-building, to ensure that neither perspectives of agency nor structure are neglected, because one affects the other, especially in the issue of trust which is contextual and based on perception.

Thirdly, I have found that studies on trust in SNSs tend not to conceptualize or operationalize the concept of trust very well. The concept of trust is rarely addressed in a clear theoretical framework, because in many studies, trust is merely alluded to, as implicit in other focal points like predicting friendship links (Lampe et al., 2007), increasing interpersonal attraction (Antheunis et al., 2008), or impression management in general (e.g. Signalling Theory and Warranting Theory). This is problematic

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because trust is foundational to all of the interactions on SNSs and deserves much more attention than that. Trust perspectives are also deterministic and reductionist, and seem to focus more on indicators of trustworthiness than the processes of trust themselves. Dedicating a chapter on trust (Chapter 3), I address trust-building with a strong theoretical foundation that focuses squarely on the issue of trust in an interpretative and holistic manner. This sets an important precedent in studies of trust in SNSs.

Fourthly, the growing number of studies on CouchSurfing and hospitality exchange networks in general will be able to draw upon this in-depth case study, as I engaged in rigorous documentation of the history of CouchSurfing. To date this is the most comprehensive report on historical developments of the CouchSurfing community and CouchSurfing International, the organization that manages the platform. Due to the conversion of CouchSurfing International from a non-profit organization to a for-profit corporation, a lot of information previously available online (such as member statistics and financial information) has been removed, and the website itself has undergone rapid changes in features and direction. Therefore this historical account is very important to those who want to understand the subculture of CouchSurfing and the past events that led to its present state.

Lastly, from a broader perspective, this study responds to the current interest on social media governance, one of the key areas of Internet studies, as discussed in the inaugural symposium of the Alexander von Humboldt Internet Institute in Berlin, held in October 2011. Trust-building on e2f-SNSs hinges very much on norm generation, a prominent area in social media governance, in the virtual realm before meeting face-to-face. This has strong relevance in this age of globalized communication and interconnectedness, when Internet penetration is increasing rapidly and netizens are being mobilized online to act offline. Cases in point are global political movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy movements. Thus, in the larger scheme of social media development, there is much significance in studying the bridging of the online to the offline.

The Case

The case study for the current analysis of e2f-SNS is CouchSurfing.org, a hospitality exchange network. Hospitality exchange networks are not a new phenomenon – the oldest such network is Servas International, founded in 1949 by an American named Bob Luitweiler. With the tagline "With every true friendship we build the basis for World Peace", Servas International set a common theme also used by newer hospitality exchange networks, to promote intercultural understanding and to reduce intolerance among people of different cultural backgrounds (Heesakkers, 2008). Other networks include Hospitality Club (founded in 2000, with about 330,000 members); GlobalFreeloaders.com (founded in 2005, with about 60,000 members). Hospitality exchange is grounded on reciprocity, negotiating thin lines between "guest" and "parasite", hospitality and home (Germann-Molz, 2007).

CouchSurfing.org was founded by Casey Fenton, who was inspired to build the website after a successful attempt to stay in a stranger's place for free while travelling to Iceland. Before leaving for his weekend trip to Iceland, he randomly emailed 1,500 students in the University of Iceland to search for potential hosts, getting 50-100 favourable responses as a result. CouchSurfing International Inc. was registered as a non-profit organization in New Hampshire, USA in 2003. Two years after the inception of the website, in 2006, CouchSurfing.org experienced a severe database loss, causing Casey Fenton to announce the closure of the website. However, with the help of volunteers, the website managed to be rebuilt and maintained. The member base of the website expanded exponentially, and CouchSurfing.org currently serves more than 4 million members (as of April 2012). CouchSurfing International became a for-profit corporation from August 2011. For the purpose of this research, "CouchSurfers", "members" and "users" are used interchangeably to mean registered users of CouchSurfing.org.

To use the services provided by CouchSurfing.org, one becomes a member or a "CouchSurfer" by registering an account in the system. No identification details (such as passport numbers etc.) are solicited, and the closest piece of information for identification that the user provides is her email address. The user then personalizes her profile to include particulars such as demographic details or auxiliary information such as personal philosophy, interests, taste in music etc. As with other SNSs, the profile is the virtual public face of the user and establishes the first impression on

his/her online identity. This step of self-presentation is crucial, as the profile is the only presence that one has CouchSurfing.org, given that one typically does not have a pre-existing social network in the community. Newcomers usually start by filling in an empty profile and revise it as they build efficacy in understanding the norms and conventions of the community, presenting a self that reflects socially desirable traits and attitudes.

One can choose to be a host (offering hospitality) or a guest/surfer (receiving hospitality). There are different shades of hospitality that a host can provide, such as offering free accommodation for a few nights, showing a surfer around town or answering questions on tourist attractions. The modus operandi for a surfer to locate hosts is through using the search function in the website, filtering the hosts according to characteristics such as couch availability, location, interests etc. (As of 2012, there is a new function added to the website that enables the traveller to present her itinerary and post a broadcast request. Hosts that are interested can then invite the traveller into their homes. However, because the function was very recently added, it was not covered during data collection and therefore will not be discussed extensively.) A request is then sent to the host, establishing initial contact, containing some self-introduction and information of when the surfer intends to visit. The host then visits the profile page of the surfer, and after some further communication (or not), makes the decision to accept or reject the request. Similar to other SNSs, CouchSurfers can "add friends", i.e. make a connection with another user within the system, and also give testimonials. It is strongly encouraged by CouchSurfing.org that friend connections and testimonials should only be given to other users that one has met face to face.

It is also pertinent to observe that many users choose to participate in vibrant communities spawned by CouchSurfing.org, in the virtual realm through forums; and in the real world with an event management system. CouchSurfers have a virtual space on forum discussion boards, mainly organized by location or interests. Named "groups" they function as interest groups that have members who discuss topics spanning 15 major categories: Places (1,180,087 members), People (164,161), Ideas (79,718), Activities and Sports (100,333), Adventures and Travelogues (40,155), Budget and Shoestring (46,877), Organizations (23,816), Student (36,520), Politics/Government (13,312), Party Train (16,543), Music and Art (123,312), Other (4,927,709), The CouchSurfing Project (19,927), CS Volunteering (2,065), CS

Organization (11,961)[1]. Access to groups can be restricted as private or be browsed by all, and one can be a member of several groups. Because there is a geographical reference to the virtual space (i.e. forum groups for different regions, cities or countries), it is easy to organize activities through discussion, and to formalize such activities through the event management system. The event management system is also organized by location, so that CouchSurfers would be able to browse through details of events (including time, venue and guest list) in their vicinity. Therefore, users who are uncomfortable in taking up the roles of surfing or hosting are still able to join in online or offline activities. In more than one way, CouchSurfing.org converts an online encounter to an offline one based on hosting/surfing activities, or other leisurely, location-based activities.

Trust is the essential ingredient to the success of CouchSurfing.org, therefore the website has several design measures to build that trust. In the website, touted under "Safety Features", are three major ways that trust is built through the system – verification, vouching and references. The verification process is optional, and begins when CouchSurfers submit their name and address into the system, along with a small donation through their credit card. The submitted name of the user will be verified with the credit card details, and a postcard is sent to the user's address with a verification code which the user needs to key into the system, to verify the address. With that, the identity and location of the user are authenticated. Vouching is an interesting concept whereby a core group of presumably trustworthy people within the system "vouch for" people that they believe are trustworthy. A user can only vouch for another after he/she has been vouched for at least three times. With that, the network of trust is expanded slowly to the periphery. References, a mechanism often used in SNSs and other online sites in general, supports giving feedback regarding another user within the system, preferably after there is face-to-face contact.

From the statistics that were available publicly on the CouchSurfing website[2], some idea can be formed of the demographical composition of CouchSurfers. Because the number of registered members has increased exponentially throughout the years, the figures keep changing. By April 2012, there were more than 4 million members registered. The average age of a CouchSurfer is 28, with 84.7% of the population aged

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[1] The data is accurate as of March 2009. By 2012, some of these groups have been deleted because of
[2] The link to the statistics has since been removed from the website when it underwent a major revamp in 2012. However the direct link (http://www.CouchSurfing.org/statistics.html) is still in operation as of 16 April, 2012

between 18 and 34. Half of the CouchSurfers are male, 43.1% females and 5.8% who own group (including couples, families, shared flats etc.) profiles. Geographical statistics (of top ten most active world regions, countries and cities) can be viewed in Table 1.1.

	By World Region	CouchSurfers	(%)
1	Europe	2,073,171	50.9%
2	North America	1,079,368	26.5%
3	South America	268,414	6.6%
4	Central Asia	249,576	6.1%
5	Oceania	135,942	3.3%
6	Southeast Asia	100,916	2.5%
7	Africa	73,768	1.8%
8	Middle East	65,981	1.6%
9	Central America and the Caribbean	20,069	0.5%
10	Antarctic Region	139	0.0%
	By Country	**CouchSurfers**	**(%)**
1	United States	862,324	21.2%
2	Germany	375,077	9.2%
3	France	339,824	8.3%
4	Canada	165,752	4.1%
5	England	160,775	3.9%
6	Spain	128,318	3.1%
7	Italy	122,352	3.0%
8	Brazil	108,723	2.7%
9	Australia	106,039	2.6%
10	China	93,592	2.3%
	By City	**CouchSurfers**	**(%)**
1	United States, New York, New York	98,059	2.4%
2	France, Ile-de-France, Paris	69,096	1.7%
3	England, London, London	59,733	1.5%
4	Germany, Berlin, Berlin	53,321	1.3%
5	Turkey, Istanbul, Istanbul	41,151	1.0%

6	Canada, Quebec, Montreal	33,832	0.8%
7	Argentina, Buenos Aires	30,241	0.7%
8	Spain, Catalonia, Barcelona	27,582	0.7%
9	Austria, Vienna, Vienna	26,711	0.7%
10	Australia, Victoria, Melbourne	26,397	0.6%

Table 1-1 Geographical distributions of most populous CouchSurfing members

A small survey conducted by Heesakkers (2008) with a sample size of 101 provides a rough indication of how surfers judge the trustworthiness of their hosts – the most important indicator appears to be positive references, followed by contact through email and the number of friend connections. Only a minority of the Couchsurfers are verified (5.9%) or vouched for (7%), suggesting that users may have to rely on other means of trust mechanisms. Further analysis on vouching patterns show that connections that are vouched can be best predicted by direct interaction between two individuals, from their friendship degree, followed by the overall Couchsurfing experience between the individuals, and also how the individuals met (Lauterbach et al., 2009). It was also found out that vouches are highly reciprocated, in 74.6% of the cases – which may reflect mutual trust, or simply the pressure to reciprocate.

Although it may be outdated by now, Lauterbach et al.'s (2009) analysis of anonymized data extracted from the CouchSurfing database yielded interesting insights into user behaviour in CouchSurfing. User participation is unevenly distributed, i.e. many users have hosted or surfed very few times, and few have hosted or surfed many times. Sixty-two percent of users do not have any friendship connection at all, which provides a rough estimate of inactive or dormant accounts within the community. Due to the rapid growth of the website, some of these members may be new and therefore connectionless, but the number of new accounts can be offset by old accounts with friend connections but which are no longer active. With the real-life data set, Lauterbach et al. were also able to unearth that a user is equally likely to have surfed or hosted, which quells sceptical questions about freeloaders leeching off the system by only choosing to surf. After initial stages of only hosting or surfing, the user is likely to engage in both. Again, with the rapid expansion of

member base from when the data was analysed, it is not apparent if newer data may still reflect the situation as described above.

Core Ideas and Research Questions

The main research question that this thesis seeks to answer is: *How is trust built on electronic-to-face Social Network Sites such as Couchsurfing.org?*

As argued by Luker (2008), social scientific researchers often stumble upon interesting cases, and frame the research question through an iterative process of scouring the field and reviewing related literature. The challenge is to anchor the research interest to a defined academic area, from which the researcher can build upon existing studies and contribute to further scholarly conversations within the area. This thesis is structured to reflect the spiral process of literature review and data collection, as research questions are refined and shaped by theoretical and empirical perspectives, while keeping the main question in mind.

For starters, I found it difficult to put Couchsurfing.org in any existing area that was neither too broad (e.g. virtual communities) nor too narrow (hospitality exchange networks). CouchSurfing.org can be classified as a Social Network Site, but existing perspectives on SNSs did not cover some of its characteristics, which would affect trust-building in a significant way. The functions of Couchsurfing are very different from Facebook, for instance, reversing the offline to online directionality of the connection made. Thus, I saw the need to carve out a new area that would address websites like Couchsurfing.org, and came up with the idea of electronic-to-face Social Network Sites. The first sub-question that stems from the main question is therefore as follows:

1. *What are electronic-to-face Social Network Sites, and how do their characteristics affect trust-building?*

Chapter 2 addresses this question by situating e2f-SNSs within the social media landscape, and building upon existing perspectives of trust-building in SNSs.

Having defined the type of platform to focus on, the next step was to look at trust-building processes. Chapter 3 takes us through the literature of trust, and focuses on Möllering's theoretical framework (2001, 2006) for an interpretative approach towards trust-building. Without going through too much theory at this point, I eventually arrive to the conclusion that the best approach to look at building trust on

e2f-SNSs is through building narratives of trustworthiness, by gathering and conveying information, facilitated by the platform. What are narratives of trustworthiness? The trustor draws upon various sources to create a story that enables her to behave as if uncertainties and risks are favourably resolved, hence facilitating the trust process. The e2f-SNS extracts and displays relevant information, with fodder provided by various trustees like individual users and institutions, for the benefit of the trustors. The narrative of trustworthiness can be pictured as a jigsaw puzzle, where the puzzle pieces are bits of information provided by the trustees, mediated by the e2f-SNS. The trustor assembles the information obtained, but is only able to see an incomplete picture because she does not have all the pieces of the puzzle. The missing parts of the picture require imagination and extrapolation. The function of the narrative of trustworthiness is to enable the trustor to establish a "reality" that is part real, part imagined, to aid her in believing that and behaving as if the trustee is trustworthy (or not).

Taking for example a host of CouchSurfing, the picture may be the depiction of the type of person that the potential guest is, her life story, how she is likely to behave as a guest, and so on. Often, this picture describes whether the trustee will behave in a trustworthy manner in the anticipated interaction. As this scenario involves irreducible uncertainty and information asymmetry (you can never really *know* if a CouchSurfer is who she says she is, and that she does not have the intentions of harming you), the trustor amasses just enough information to construct a coherent narrative to trust or distrust the trustee. From the website, just from the personal profile, there is a wealth of information, like personal descriptions, demographic information, the references left by other people, the friend links, and other symbols specific to the community (such as the badge for ambassadors). The trustor draws what she needs from this pool of information to describe the trustee and the probable outcome of future interactions.

Looking at the narrative built is a good way to work on the problem at hand. Firstly, this premise is supported by the literature, particularly in the work of Möllering (2001 and 2006), where it is suggested that people build trust through creating fiction, in facilitating the mental leap into the unknown. Secondly, e2f-SNSs are engineered to facilitate the leap of faith from online to offline. To do that, they supply a multitude of information that people can use to make trusting decisions on. This information is arranged and strung together through a narrative account, and

through the data I observed some patterns of how the narratives are formed. I look at the factors that shape the narratives, and the means through which the narrative is communicated. This gives the flexibility for idiosyncrasies in the stories and the processes in constructing said stories, yet keeps the generalizability at a theoretical level. Following this main premise of people creating narratives to build trust, my main concerns are therefore two things: the content of the narratives, and the way the people use the e2f-SNS to derive and communicate these narratives. Therefore, the next sub questions that are specific to user-to-user trust-building are:

2. *What are the factors that form the content of narratives of trustworthiness?*

   and

3. *How do people present themselves through the e2f-SNS to convey these narratives of trustworthiness?*

Question 2 is addressed in Chapter 4, where I look at factors that affect the narratives of trustworthiness from a macro level of a metanarrative of reflexive cosmopolitanism, and a micro level of risk perception and expected interactions. For Question 3, which is addressed in Chapter 5, I adopt the angle of Erving Goffman's presentation of self as a general direction, for several reasons. Existing studies on SNSs often focus on impression management (for example boyd & Ellison, 2007; Richter et al., 2009), and presentation of self is useful in building trust in at least three ways: the portrayal of trustworthiness, performance of a familiar role under social conventions, and acting as if trust exists at early stages of trust development when there is no basis for trust (Möllering, 2006). I argue that CouchSurfers use a number of strategies such as accumulating subcultural capital, optimizing the match of the interaction partners, as well as manipulating trust mechanisms.

My main interest is in user-to-user trust; however the study would not be complete in looking at one other trustee in this equation, i.e. CouchSurfing International, the organization that is behind the website and manages the platform that to some extent frames user-to-user interactions. Chapter 6 takes us through a historical account of CouchSurfing.org to understand the background of the system built by a community with a strong volunteering culture, to its present days of a web service with a membership of millions of users, maintained by CouchSurfing

International a corporation. Through that we uncover some controversies that throw light upon some alleged trust violations by the organization, prompting the question:

4. *To what extent, and how does the organization (CouchSurfing International) affect user-to-user trust on Couchsurfing.org?*

Development of events surrounding CouchSurfing.org provides a good opportunity to apply the theoretical framework of building narratives of trust onto both trustees – members of the community and the organization that is behind Couchsurfing. There is potential confusion between the community and the organization: this is due to the background of CouchSurfing International as being a volunteer-driven organization in the beginning. Apart from a few leaders, the organization had thousands of volunteers engaged in various operations, such as website development and translation. As the organization evolved throughout the years, volunteering activity slowly dwindled, and after the conversion of the legal structure of CouchSurfing International, the organization and the community reached a clear separation. I provide a comprehensive historical account of CouchSurfing, and amass a number of controversies and trust violations committed by CouchSurfing International over the years, in Chapter 6. A rich context is given about

Lastly, having looked at all these different angles for trust-building, I return to answer the main question in Chapter 7.

Research Methodology

Data collection for my research was an extensive process spanning 3 years (from mid-2009 to mid-2012), which involved a complete immersion into the field, both online and offline. During periods of face-to-face data collection, I conducted participant observation as a host and a travelling CouchSurfer, and interviewed my guests and surfers, as well as other CouchSurfers that I met along the way. In the pilot study from November 2009 to January 2010, I hosted 15 CouchSurfers in my living room and interviewed them. A year later (April – August 2011), I conducted 22 interviews with my hosts and some CouchSurfing volunteers while couchsurfing in some cities of the UK, France, Austria, and The Netherlands. In October 2011, I attended a conference in Berlin hosted by CouchSurfing International, and interviewed Casey Fenton, one of the co-founders of the organization. During the intervals

between "formal" data collection, I continued to host and couchsurf when I travelled. CouchSurfing had become a lifestyle for me.

By the time of this writing, I have been a host 50 times (56 individuals from 26 different nationalities) and surfed 28 times (23 locations across 10 countries in Europe, North America, Asia& Oceania). I have also been to numerous events internationally, from small get-togethers like a dinner with 3 other CouchSurfers, to large-scale events like Vienna Calling involving hundreds of CouchSurfers. In terms of online data collection, I relied on the forums and other online sources extensively while writing up the historical account of CouchSurfing. The next sections will elaborate on specifics of the research methodology used.

Data Collection Offline

First Wave of Data Collection
Location: My living room
Period of data collection: 3 months (November 2009 - January 2010)
Interviews conducted: 15

During my second year of study, I moved out of student accommodation and into a rented apartment, shared with a flatmate. Finally with a space that I could call my own, I also managed to persuade my flatmate (30, male, Taiwanese) to open our living room to host CouchSurfers, as part of my initial data collection within the field. "For science!" I said, pumping my fist for emphasis. Being a researcher (in biology) himself, and a very nice person in general, he conceded. Our living room had a large floor space that is able to accommodate at least three people comfortably. My flatmate owned a large screen LCD television and a Play Station 3, which he kept in the living room. We did not have a spare key to give to the guests, though they were free to leave the flat anytime they wanted (even when we were not in the flat) because the main door locked automatically upon closing.

Thus began my 3-month exploratory fieldwork of participant observation and in-depth interviews, in my own living room. Although I had already couchsurfed a number of times, I had never been a host before. I revised my CouchSurfing profile to include vital information on my "couch" (see Appendix A), which in CouchSurfing

terms could mean anywhere between floor space to a guest bedroom. For mine, it meant a spare mattress on the floor of the living room. I prepared some interview questions, covering open-ended questions to discover the respondents' self-definition of trust, the manner in which online profiles were assessed, and their world views with regards to trust and CouchSurfing.org. I wanted to confirm the basic assumption that the respondents believed that trust existed within their activities, and to understand their world views about trust within the contextual situation of CouchSurfing.org.

From November 2009 to January 2010, I hosted 15 CouchSurfers from all over the world. I did not talk to any of the CouchSurfers that I already knew, but chose to interview only the CouchSurfers who requested to stay with me, after reading my online profile. It was specifically stated on my profile that I was doing research on CouchSurfing, so that participants knew that they were going to participate in my research project. This was done with the intention of gaining trust of potential respondents and to ensure compliance with ethical requirements of non-deception. I tried to accommodate all that I could, and only turned down requests when I was already hosting someone else at the time, therefore the sample selection was relatively free of bias.

Of the 15 respondents, 7 were female and 8 were male. The age range was 18-34, the average age being 27. Most of the respondents were educated to tertiary level, and most were individual travellers, though sometimes there were overlaps in their periods of stay, resulting in up to two surfers at my living room simultaneously at times. All were asked beforehand if they were agreeable with sharing the living room with another stranger. I did not make any changes to my couch information to indicate this. Only in one case did I have a party of three CouchSurfers staying over, and the interview was conducted in a focus group style to save time. Also, although I put "two to three nights" as the norm, I permitted some of the CouchSurfers to stay more than that, up to 8 nights. The countries represented within the sample are Singapore, Indonesia, Taiwan, Switzerland (2), Slovakia, Estonia, Germany, Poland (3), USA, Brazil, Nigeria, Australia. (See Appendix D for more information.)

Figure1-2Geographical locations of CouchSurfers that I hosted and interviewed, based on birthplace

Second Wave of Data Collection

Location: Europe (various cities in the UK, France, Austria, The Netherlands)

Period of data collection: 4 months (April – August 2011)

Interviews conducted: 21

Important event attended: Vienna Calling 2012

In 2011, I obtained funding from the 3K Student Research Grant (awarded by WKWSCI in NTU) and set off for a four-month CouchSurfing trip in Europe. As written in my grant proposal:

> "Since more than 50% of the world's CouchSurfing members are based in Europe (even those that are based in Asia are often European expatriates), I have decided to do my fieldwork there. As previously mentioned, major cities for CouchSurfing in Europe are Paris, London, Berlin and Vienna, therefore these shall be my localities of focus. The aim shall be to couchsurf (as a guest) at least 3 times in every city or its vicinity, range of stay being 3 to 5 days, depending on couch availability and with the objective of diversifying the sample. Participant observation and interviews will be conducted during these stays with the consent of the hosts. I will also contact CouchSurfers in the vicinity with noteworthy profiles for face-to-face interviews."

The original plan to focus on Paris, London, Berlin and Vienna soon proved to be impractical, as I found out that these cities were precisely the ones that were hardest to find a couch in, because of the high volume of visiting travellers. Hosts were

inundated by requests, and it became clear that I would have difficulties in getting hosts if I stayed within the big cities. From then, I decided to improvise on the localities that I visited based on couch availability and budget considerations, and continue to diversify the sample according to the demographics. The sampling methods used were convenience sampling and snowball sampling.

I spent about two months out of the four months surfing on 16 couches through CouchSurfing (some hosts were individuals and some were couples). In my couch requests, I mentioned my research topic and the interest to interview the hosts if they were willing. Most of my hosts became my interview respondents, except for three who did not have the time. While travelling, I also met CouchSurfers who took an interest in my work and volunteered to be interviewed; and during Vienna Calling, one of the biggest annual CouchSurfing events, I relied mostly on snowball sampling to talk to active volunteers of CouchSurfing. 21 interviews were held – out of which, 3 were interviews with couples – so there were 24 individuals interviewed in total.

Among the 24 people interviewed, there were 10 females and 14 males. The respondents were from a wide spectrum of different ages, from 20 to 71, across 12 nationalities[3]. Four respondents were active volunteers and very much engaged in online and offline CouchSurfing activities as well as the internal politics; the rest mostly hosted or surfed casually and were not very concerned about activities within the community. The list of interviewees along with brief demographic information can be found in Appendix D.

Third Wave of Data Collection
Location: Berlin, Germany
Interviews conducted: 1
Period of data collection: 1 week (in October 2011)
Important event attended: CS Conference in Berlin

In October 2011, after the announcement of CouchSurfing International of its conversion from a non-profit to a for-profit, Casey Fenton, the founder of the website, toured 5 main CouchSurfing cities (Istanbul, Montreal, London, Paris, and Berlin) to

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[3]Italian (1), British (5), Irish (1), French (3), German (2), Spanish (1), Dutch (3), Austrian (3), Portuguese (1), Australian (1), American (2), Polish (1)

give presentations on the topic. I had the opportunity to be in Berlin at that time, and arranged an interview with Fenton. To document the conversion and people's reactions, I audio-recorded the presentation and took extensive notes, and attended the workshop during the weekend where a small group discussion was held with Fenton, to discuss issues of the conversion, ideas on improving the website, and potential revenue models.

Data collection online

In Chapter 6, I document the historical development of the website, and the bulk of data comes from online sources. There were official accounts, mostly pages from the website, on its history, company vision and mission and so on; and also Casey Fenton's official blog. The most comprehensive chronological account on CouchSurfing is on its Wikipedia page, in which the history of CouchSurfing is briefly summarized, from its conception to its conversion to a for-profit corporation. However, to understand the evolution of the website and the thousands of volunteers who contributed to it, a brief account does not suffice. Therefore, I drew upon other online sources (see Appendix E), many critical commentaries of the website and the organization behind it, as it grew and evolved to be the CouchSurfing of the present day. Forum groups hosted by CS were a rich source of information, as were other firsthand accounts such as resignation letters of volunteers and Google Groups conversations.

Piecing together different sources of information took weeks of Internet sleuthing on the forum groups and other web pages. From hyperlink to hyperlink, I trawled through ideological debates, facts and figures, hearsay, allegations, trolling insults and much more – hundreds of pages of member discussions. Virtual personalities became vivid as I familiarized myself with the community, member reputations, and group dynamics within the forums. Some of these personalities I later met in person, which made reading the forum posts even more interesting when I returned to the online world. While it would be ideal to read all the posts on CouchSurfing politics, the sheer amount of text involved renders this infeasible. Therefore, to the best of my abilities, I try to present the notable events and general sentiments gleaned from the forums, and quote the statements to illustrate the case, accompanied by my analysis.

I have also tried my best to find and quote from credible sources. Many are first-hand accounts published on public forums, which I view as valuable data. Although it is difficult to verify the veracity of the statements and research done by some members of the community, I have made my best efforts to filter through the statements, and will provide caveats whenever I have doubt. Regretfully, some of the documents that looked very useful had been removed from the Internet by the time I started archiving the information in early 2012, leading to some dead ends in terms of references. However, the available pieces of information, working web links and so on, are sufficient to form the picture that I paint beneath.

To ensure the accuracy of the accounts, I enlisted the help of some long-term observers and volunteers to the website, who contributed their time generously in pointing me to links, and in reading the final draft of this chapter for the purpose of fact-checking. The historical account is the result of meticulous combing through a lot of information, and I have exercised due diligence in investigating and documenting the sequences of events in a fair and objective manner, providing different sides of the story.

Research Ethics and Researcher Reflexivity

According to the Framework for Research Ethics published by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) of the United Kingdom[4], there are 6 key principles for ethical research, quoted ad verbatim here:

1. Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity, quality and transparency.
2. Research staff and participants must normally be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved.
3. The confidentiality of information supplied by research participants and the anonymity of respondents must be respected.
4. Research participants must take part voluntarily, free from any coercion.
5. Harm to research participants must be avoided in all instances.
6. The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.

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[4]Accessed online at http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/Framework_for_Research_Ethics_tcm8-4586.pdf on 6/8/12

I adhered to these research principles to the best of my abilities. Much of my face-to-face data collection was carried out in intimate spaces of personal homes, in either mine or my host's, and I interacted closely with them as part of the hosting/surfing experience and as part of my research methods used. At no point did I cover my identity as a researcher on the topic, as it was always explicitly stated in my couch information (see Appendix A), couch requests or emails before the face-to-face interaction. I recognize that, by acting as a host to my research participants, I may be subjecting them to a situation of power imbalance, as they rely on my hospitality and free accommodation. This is addressed by giving them an informed consent form, where the participants are briefed about their rights as research subjects, such as issues of confidentiality and the ability to terminate the interview at any time that they please with no ramifications (see Appendix B). The same informed consent form was administered to other respondents. Participant observation appears to be the most effective way to gain an insider's point of view, yielding contextual and nuanced insights that quantitative surveys are unable to depict. Constant self-reflexivity and caution were exercised to ensure that data collection would be done as mindfully and unobtrusively as possible.

There are certain drawbacks in using convenience sampling. I acknowledge that selection bias may happen, through putting up a notice on my couch information to attract research participants to host (although it must be said that hosts in Singapore are scarce, and it is likely that participants may have approached me for my couch more than the interest in my research) or soliciting interviews in my couch requests for hosts. However, convenience sampling is probably the most commonly used sampling method, because it is easier, less expensive, and timelier than probability sampling techniques (Gravetter & Forzano, 2012). It is also in compliance with ethical considerations of non-deception that potential research participants know about my research. I took care to ensure that the sample was reasonably representative of the population at the first stage of data collection. Data collection at the second stage was informed by theory and knowledge from the pilot study; therefore I diversified the sample for generalizability at a theoretical level (as recommended by Mays & Pope, 1995).

As researchers influence the collection, selection, and interpretation of the data, it is important for the readers of this thesis to know the background of the researcher (Finlay, 2002), as to form their own interpretations of the following writing. I started

doing research on CouchSurfing upon commencement of my PhD studies, but I had been a member of CouchSurfing.org and used it for multiple occasions to surf couches when I was travelling; I also often hitchhiked to get around, whether alone or with a partner. This may be indicative for some on my disposition on trust towards society in general, although I am reluctant to make this generalization without context. It is also important that I state my position as a social activist with egalitarian views.

Here is an example of how this may be an issue that influences my interpretations of the data. The conversion of CouchSurfing International to profit-making corporation happened concurrently with the global Occupy Together movement, in which mass demonstrations were held worldwide protesting corporate greed and social inequality. The CouchSurfing conference in Berlin coincided with the Occupy Berlin demonstration (which I participated in), happening on the same weekend. I have tried, to the best of my abilities, to avoid being unfairly critical of the corporatization of Couchsurfing. However, I am aware that while writing up the historical account of CouchSurfing.org and synthesizing the available information, I felt a sense of injustice and moral outrage, with regards to the treatment of volunteers and other allegations against CouchSurfing International. The readers should therefore consider the ideological standpoint of the researcher while reading this report, and make their own interpretations of the text.

With all the disclosures and disclaimers out of the way, we proceed to start the journey of exploration, first starting with the research area of electronic-to-face Social Network Sites.

CHAPTER 2 – WHAT IS THIS A CASE OF?

To study the case, we need to situate it within a bigger picture to decide which of its attributes are relevant for investigation, and from what existing literature we should draw from. As mentioned in the introduction, I coined the term electronic-to-face Social Network Sites to address the breed of websites similar to CouchSurfing.org. Prior to settling on this niche, there was a lengthy process of trying to figure out where to place CouchSurfing. It was difficult because it looked like it could fit into multiple boxes, yet with its quirks and oddities, it did not fit neatly into any one of the boxes either. To study it as a virtual community would be too broad, and from the angle of hospitality exchange networks would be too narrow. While it has the characteristics of a Social Network Site as a platform, it does not seem to fit into the descriptions of mainstream studies on SNSs, much less on the matters of trust. Only when we clearly delineate the area of study can we position the discussion in a logical and systematic manner.

Introducing Electronic-to-face Social Network Sites (e2f-SNSs)

As you may observe from the coinage of the term, there are two main components to the concept of e2f-SNSs. They are Social Network Sites (SNSs) connecting people online with the intention of meeting offline (electronic-to-face). There are existing definitions for both. First, SNSs as defined by boyd and Ellison (2007) are "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". Other researchers have come up with names like Web-Based Social Networks (Golbeck, 2007), Online Social Networks (Kazienko & Musial, 2006), Social Networking Sites (Donath & boyd, 2004), but they refer to the same concept.

To refine the idea, Golbeck (2007) provides further requirements: SNSs are accessible over the web with a web browser (excluding networks that require special software to connect); users have to articulate their social connections instead of having the system compile information to yield that data; the system must be designed to

enable these articulations, with "some greater over-arching and unifying structure that connects the data and regulates how it is presented and formatted" (p.3). To laypeople, these definitions may not mean much – but they would recognize SNSs like Facebook and LinkedIn, and how they have permeated our lives and become an integral part of the social media landscape. The definitions simply make it easier for us to visualize the characteristics of the platform, to be used further in this discussion.

From the inception of the first SNS, SixDegrees.com in 1997, many others have followed, catering to different segments of the market according to need and demography. From general social networks (e.g. Facebook, Friendster etc.), professional networks (e.g. LinkedIn), networks for user-generated content (e.g. Youtube, LiveJournal) to country-specific networks (e.g. Qzone for China), users are spoilt for choice when deciding to construct a network online. The boom of the SNS scene has even prompted the acronym, YASN or YASNS – Yet Another Social Network (Site), indicating the perceived market saturation (Wan & Zhao, 2007). Popular SNSs include Facebook, with over 900 million members[5], Twitter (500 million[6]), Sina Weibo (300 million[7]), Google Plus (250 million[8]), and so on. With the blossoming of SNSs of every niche and function, research on social media has also expanded in the past few years.

At this point it is appropriate to introduce the "electronic-to-face" component of the concept. Weinberg and Williams (2006) differentiate between face-to-electronic (f2e) and electronic-to-face (e2f) communities. The former connects people who already have a preliminary impression of one another at least, having met face-to-face, before using websites such as Facebook or Classmates.com to form a network online. The latter enables one to create some kind of online impression of oneself first, before meeting up offline. There are differing accounts on meeting offline for the first time – some scholars have reported "a reduction in discomfort and result in increased feelings of affection" (Parks & Floyd, 1996, cf. Sessions, 2010, p.379) or the experience as "jarring and disconcerting" (Kendall, 2002, cf. ibid). The transition from online to

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[5]"Facebook Now Totals 901 Million Users, Profits Slip",
http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2403410,00.aspaccessed on4/8/12.
[6]Twitter To Surpass 500 Million Registered Users On Wednesday,
http://www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/500-million-registered-users_b18842 accessed on 5/8/12
[7] "Sina's Weibo Outlook Buoys Internet Stock Gains: China Overnight"
http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-02-28/sina-s-weibo-outlook-buoys-internet-stock-gains-in-n-y-china-overnight.html accessed on 5/8/12
[8] "Google+ Now Has A Tablet Version, Events, 250M Users, 75M Daily, More Mobile Than Desktop"
http://techcrunch.com/2012/06/27/google-i-o/, accessed on 4/8/12

offline reflects a leap of faith – sufficient trust has been built through online interactions to ease the actors into a face-to-face encounter. Naturally, the setting and purpose of the meet up affect the level of trust needed.

The term "electronic-to-face" can be attributed to Williams et al. (2004) who were studying the effects of using Meetup.com for political campaigning. It has been stated that most research on online communities focus on extending one's social networks through the Internet: "the presumption that when online and offline social networks overlapped, the directionality was online to offline – online connections resulted in face-to-face meetings" (Ellison et al., 2007). Ellison et al. argue that this e2f directionality may not apply to SNSs, as users tend to use SNSs to support their existing offline social networks than to meet strangers, as shown by Lampe et al. (2006). Many studies since then have been predominantly focused on the face-to-electronic paradigm, either explicitly – in exploring the connection between offline and online social networks (e.g. Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Pollet et al., 2011), or implicitly – in studies that focus on SNSs like Facebook which are mainly f2e-SNSs (e.g. Utz & Beukeboom, 2011; Lampe et al., 2007; Walther et al., 2009 etc).

With the focus on the f2e paradigm, there are certain assumptions held, as listed by Lampe et al. (2007). Firstly, there is a "natural boundary" around the network to determine the in-group. Secondly, the perceived verification of an online profile by its articulated relationships (friend links) increases the likelihood of online encounters leading to offline meetings. Thirdly, participation online may be reinforced by offline connections. These observations may not apply to e2f-SNSs. For instance, there is no offline boundary around one's network as one expands it by connecting to other people online. Typically, one searches for new contacts through a search engine and not through a friend-of-a-friend.

It is somewhat ironic then that the emphasis on f2e-SNSs then has left a void in scholarship of e2f-SNSs. The rationale of focusing on electronic-to-face SNSs is that trust issues become more vivid and pertinent, as opposed to face-to-electronic SNSs where participants tend to already know each other in a personal capacity, whether it is a casual acquaintance or a close relative. To illustrate this, in Chaube et al.'s study of participation in rideshare programmes (2010), they find that social networks can be utilized to embed trust among participants, as people were less reluctant to share rides with friends, or friends of friends. This supports the case that in f2e-SNSs, basic trust is already existent. In the case where both sides of the trust dyad do not know each

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other beforehand and rely on online interactions (such as portrayal and assessment of online profiles) to make trusting decisions, trust becomes a salient issue. From an individual level, what makes a profile more successful than another in forming virtual connections, which trusting outcome is attested by a face-to-face encounter? Situated within the context of a community, how do interactions among individuals within a social network form interpersonal trust, and propagate that to a community level?
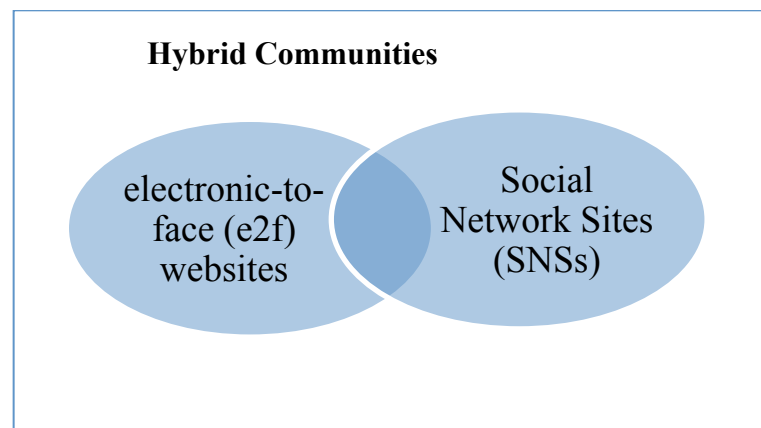
Figure 2-1The Intersection that we're interested in

The shaded area in Figure 2.1 shows the intersection of e2f-SNSs that we are interested in, marked within the universe of hybrid communities. But what are hybrid communities? To get to this, we first have to zoom out to the field of virtual communities.

Many scholars have attempted to define virtual communities, which is not surprising, given that the concept community had already amassed at least 94 different definitions by the mid-1950s (Hillery, 1955). Some of the examples of definitions of virtual communities include "an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms" (Porter, 2004); "informational and emotional support groups that form the same type of bonds as geographic communities that share their experiences" (Barnes, 2003); and "all groups and networks that enable individuals to communicate with each other on the Internet" (Song, 2009). As shown by the examples, the meaning of virtual communities differs from researcher to researcher. Some researchers even question the very use of the word "community", which is value-laden, preferring instead to use the word "togetherness" to allow room for different contexts of computer-mediated activity, not all of which would live up to the "normative load" that community carries (Bakardjieva, 2003/2006: 129).

One could spend a lot of time on debates with regards to the meaning of virtual communities. Even the "imagined communities" as coined by Benedict Anderson can be argued to hold some element of virtuality (Bakardjieva, 2003/2006). To advance the research and to avoid getting hindered by lexicography, I adopt Barry Wellman's approach to viewing virtual communities as social networks supported by the Internet: virtual communities are "networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity" (Wellman, 2001). The focus on networks by definition is useful for looking at SNSs. Communities have become sparsely-knit and spatially-dispersed social networks rather than localized village-like groups as a result of capitalism, bureaucratization, industrialization and urbanization (Wellman et al., 2002). Therefore a phenomenon of "personal community" or "network individualism" arises, as elaborated below:

> "Each person is a switchboard, between ties and networks. People remain connected, but as individuals, rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and household. Each person operates a separate personal community network and switches rapidly among multiple sub-networks. In effect, the Internet and other new communication technology are helping individuals to personalize their own communities. This is neither a prima facie loss nor gain, but rather a complex, fundamental transformation in the nature of community." (Wellman et al., 2002)

Conceptually, SNSs are an articulation of a personal community (or multiple) on the Internet. The tangible and mapped social network gives us the flexibility to scrutinize the relationship and communication between nodes, and also the individual network of connections that fits into a larger social network. As argued by Richter et al. (2009), SNSs are the "manifestation" of what they call Internet Social Networking.

Studies interested in virtual communities usually create ideal types of three different communities – 1) physical face-to-face communities; 2) virtual computer mediated communities, and 3) hybrid communities encompassing characteristics of both physical and virtual (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999; Navarrete & Huerta, 2006). Hybrid communities are "groups that overlap their offline and online communication" (Navarrete & Huerta, 2006, p.1). When hybrid communities are mentioned, it is assumed that they are a mix between online and offline communities, and hence would encompass the characteristics of both ideal types, creating some sort of compromise or improvement on the shortcomings of each. For instance, Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) posit that communities that capitalize on both face-to-face and CMC systems would be able to create better relationships and social bonds, as well as to share values more

effectively, combining the best of both worlds. This may be a premature assumption, as researchers have found that technology is not a direct answer, or "magic wand" to aid communication and decision-making (Poole and Holmes, 1995, p.123 – cf. Papacharissi, 2005).

Extrapolating from the point that members of a hybrid community would be connected in real life and also virtually, a logical implication is that members of the community would have to meet offline first and connect online, or vice versa. This simple observation in itself creates two distinct types of hybrid communities: face-to-electronic (f2e) communities and electronic-to-face (e2f) communities. Hence we have come a full circle, of where e2f-SNSs are situated. The purpose of situating the e2f-SNSs is to look specifically at the studies that have been done on trust-building in these areas.

Peculiarities of E2f-SNSs

To reiterate what have been discussed before, in an e2f-SNS, users can construct a profile, display a list of other users that they have a connection with, and view these connections as well as connections of others within the system. They initiate the connections online, then meet offline. The last requirement brings some interesting implications.

Firstly, the personal profile is of utmost importance in an e2f-SNS. This is true of any e2f platform. Because one starts off with a virtual persona, she has to "write herself into being", as put by boyd (2006). Different researchers have come up with similar conclusions on how people present themselves on their profiles on e2f platforms. From her research on online dating, Whitty (2008) proposed that users strategized their impression management, via "Balance between an Attractive and a Real Self (BAR)" theory. Online daters believe that they are presenting a more attractive (but still truthful) version of themselves, rather than an inauthentic self. Through presenting themselves as taller, slimmer, more beautiful, more macho etc., by showing old photos for example, they may be able to garner a higher number of potential dates. Zhao et al. (2008) argues that the online identity anchored offline creates the depiction of a "hoped for possible self", elaborated as "socially desirable selves individuals would like to present to others, and in the cases [Zhao et al.] were examining, they were also identities that apparently had not been fully established

offline." Users therefore walk the fine line between being honest and presenting an interesting self, whom others would be interested to get to know. Contrasting this with f2e-SNSs, if the SNS is just used for articulating and maintaining one's offline network, it is not as crucial to have a well-crafted personal profile, presenting oneself in a good light.

Secondly, e2f-SNSs connect users with specific instrumental goals, such as hospitality exchange (guests and hosts), employment (employers and employees), etc. This is not necessarily the case with f2e-SNSs. The platform bridges the gap between supply and demand by providing infrastructure and information that support the social processes involved. For instance, in a hospitality exchange network such as CouchSurfing.org, data fields extract information pertinent to the function (e.g. couch information in the personal profile, or estimated time of arrival in couch requests), and advice sections provide information about how to be a good host or guest. Because the goal is clear, the website is designed to accommodate specific needs and users have specific expectations of the outcome of the interactions.

The third point relates to the way in which users connect. To connect users for the instrumental goals mentioned in the point above, E2f-SNSs usually provide matching systems. In earlier studies of how people use SNSs for networking, Lampe et al. (2006) argue that there are two ways that people connect on e2f-SNSs. The first is "social searching", where people search for their acquaintances that they share an offline connection with. The second is "social browsing", where people use their connections of friends, and friends of friends, to form new acquaintances. These do not describe how users find other users on e2f-SNSs. I propose a third possibility, "social matching", where users are matched by the system based on their stipulated requirements, such as search criteria (such as age range, gender, certain keywords etc.). While it is conceivable that social searching and social browsing both may be used on an e2f-SNS, social matching is the most prevalent in e2f-SNSs.

Fourthly, trust mechanisms are very important in e2f-SNSs. Displaying one's network, the integral feature of SNSs, becomes a trust mechanism so that one is able to infer trustworthiness from a large network of friends displayed. There are also other forms of trust mechanisms such as reputation systems (in terms of ratings or reviews), or the organization could provide some verification services to authenticate user accounts. The trust mechanisms are usually some sort of feedback loop from the offline back to the online, verifying that the offline identity of the user corresponds

with the online, and giving indications about the successfulness of the face-to-face interaction with other users. This also depends on the level of privateness of the interaction. For example, on Fetlife.com, a BDSM-themed e2f-SNS, interactions are very personal and feedback is not given on a public platform. This gives early indication of the discussions to come - on how trust is built from multiple levels and from multiple mechanisms, and is very much tailored to the context at hand.

Fifthly, the virtual community factor in e2f-SNS is stronger than usual f2e-SNSs, although they are both hybrid communities. Because the function of f2e-SNSs focus on articulating one's offline social networks, interactions online are not as extensive as e2f-SNSs. In e2f-SNSs, the point of connection is online, and although the intended function is to facilitate offline meetings, there are people who use the platform to connect to like-minded people online and never move beyond that. As such, functions such as online forums are quite common on e2f-SNSs. Feedback is also encouraged from the community as a form of reputation system. This is because users of e2f-SNSs typically start off with few friends, expanding as they grow their network of users that they meet offline. Feedback from other members that they have met face-to-face helps as a trust mechanism, as mentioned in the point above.

Couchsurfing, as a hospitality exchange network, is the perfect example of an e2f-SNS[9]. Through Couchsurfing, Couchsurfers are able to connect through searching for each other, whether for hosts or guests, or for activity partners. Active Couchsurfers often have extensive profiles, and maintain them vigorously, accumulating references and a network of friends. The options by which a Couchsurfer can search for someone suitable are extensive, the basic one being location, because of its function of connecting the local to the traveller. There are multiple choices of trust mechanisms engineered to help the users make trusting decisions. Does this person look like a serial killer? Should I accept the request of this person? Would I enjoy the company of that?

I would also like to point out that, although I am working on e2f-SNSs, there is a larger pool of e2f websites out there which will be able to use much of what is learnt in this study. Through a brief traipse around the Internet, I was able to identify some e2f websites, and provide some idea of the functions and features in Table 2.1. Most,

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[9] I'd like to mention that not all hospitality exchange networks are SNSs. Those that are include Couchsurfing, BeWelcome, Tripping.com; those that aren't include GlobalFreeloaders and Hospitality Club.

if not all e2f websites have personal profiles for their members. The viewable friend list, integral to SNSs in general, is featured in some e2f communities but not all. As the viewable friend list is a type of trust mechanism, this may be due to the availability of other trust mechanisms, as, in some cases such as rideshare sites, feedback from previous interactions seem to suffice. It also depends on the function of the website. For instance, in the case of online dating sites, there are no community-based features because they serve fairly personal and private purposes.

Site	Short description	Profile	Search function	Viewable Friend list	Forum function	Feedback / References
Hospex (SNS)	Facilitates hospitality exchange, e.g. BeWelcome, Tripping	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Hospex (Non-SNS)	Facilitates hospitality exchange, e.g. Warmshowers, Hospitality Club, Global Freeloaders	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
AirBnB	Similar with hospex sites, except that guests pay hosts	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Fetlife	BDSM-themed SNS	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Find A Crew	Matches boats and crew for boats	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Rideshare sites	Facilitate car pools among strangers e.g. Mitfahrgelegenheit (Germany), or Carpoolking (Singapore)	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Meetup.com	Facilitates face-to-face meetings based on various common interests	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Online dating sites	e.g. Match.com, OKCupid	Y	Y	N	N	N

Table 2-1Features of e2f websites

E2f-SNSs sit in an interesting spot in between the real and the virtual, and the private and the public. It is often assumed that trust on the Internet is special, or even "peculiarly extreme" (Hardin, 2006, p.98) because of the anonymity afforded, resulting in situations resembling experimental games in which participants have no idea about who they are interacting with. Yet it is recognized that if an offline relationship is appended on the connection, actors have more stake in behaving in a trustworthy way because of the interest in continuing the relationship, and also to get more information about the other party (ibid). An overarching thing to remember is that there are two communication channels (the online and the offline), but these happen in the same social plane. This means that the online and offline interactions implicate upon each other, and are subjected to the same social structure, norms and belief systems within the community. The interactions happen at a public level, where one's personal profile is open to other members, as well as postings on forums and meet for face-to-face activities in a group etc.; yet they also happen at a private level, where members communicate via personal messages, or arrange to meet one-on-one. Studies of trust-building that we are interested in will have to take these complexities into account.

Figure 2-2 An example of an e2f-SNS profile (CouchSurfing.org)
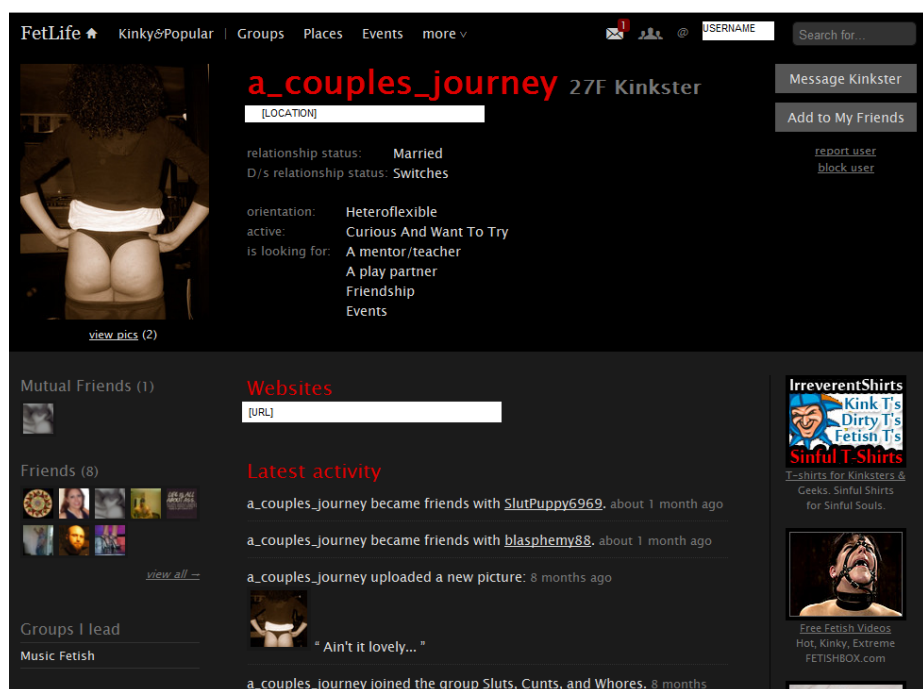
Figure 2-3 Another example of an e2f-SNS profile (Fetlife.com)

Relevant Studies of Trust-Building Online

There have been many studies on trust-building online, naturally building upon studies of trust in the offline world, like how communications online extend that of the offline, in terms of facilitating exchanges and social interactions (Corritore et al., 2003). Many works equate online trust with e-commerce, typically a business-to-consumer (B2C) framework (Shankar, Urban & Sultan, 2002; Corritore et al., 2003; Wang & Emurian, 2005). For instance, Wang and Emurian (2005) claim that in the context of online trust, "the trustor is typically a consumer who is browsing an e-commerce website, and the trustee is the e-commerce website, or more specifically, the merchant that the website represents". However, this perspective is increasingly outdated with the advent of Web 2.0, which emphasizes upon participation, collaboration, information sharing and ultimately, communication among end-users of the Internet. Examples of platforms of this paradigm shift include Social Network Sites, blogs, wikis, etc.

There are some guidelines that would apply to trust-building across web systems regardless of function, be they e-commerce, e-services, online communities and other websites. For instance, Schneiderman(2000) argues for open and transparent governance in web systems to build trust. Vital information should be provided for users within the system, such as patterns of past performance, references from past and current users, third party certifications, and clear privacy and security policies. The responsibilities and obligations of all entities within the system should be clarified, with clear specifications of guarantees and compensation policies (if any) and support for dispute resolution and mediation services.

Elsewhere, Ba (2001) argues that the uncertainty of the online environment and information asymmetry are two major barriers to online trust, which is true for all online systems. There are two types of uncertainties faced by users in an online environment. One is system-dependent, i.e. risks associated with technological security and design issues; and the other is transaction-specific, i.e. the context in which the transactions happen (Briggs et al., 2004). Briggs et al. propose a three-stage model of how trust is built and maintained through interactions with a website, taking into account both types of risk. The first stage is when the first impression is made, and trust is highly influenced by the design of the site, in terms of aesthetics or

functions. At Stage 2, there is further involvement and transactions with the site, and trust is based on the perceived ability, integrity and benevolence of the website. At the third stage, the user and the website develop a relationship, at this point Briggs et al. argue for more personalization in terms of design, though the findings of empirical studies appear to be inconclusive for the case of personalization.

Transaction-specific risks that interest me do not stem from B2C transactions because those have been addressed extensively in business research, and there is need for studies of trust that bridges the gap between users of a system. Research on interpersonal trust, in the offline world, goes back for 50 years (Lewicki et al., 2006) yet researchers on online trust have not gained much mileage in that aspect. This may be due to the wide variety of platforms that facilitate interpersonal trust online. Types of exchange vary as the blanket of "interpersonal trust online" covers a wide spectrum of different services and interactions, from Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) online auctions to online dating.

To dissect trust-building on e2f-SNSs, a good place to start is to look at the studies on social cues in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Social cues online transmit social information about interaction partners, and help in reducing uncertainty that arise from the lack of non-verbal cues that are present in face-to-face interaction, such as "posture, dress, proximity and orientation, physical appearance, facial expression, and direction of gaze" (Short et al., 1976, cf. Tanis & Postmes, 2003, p.678). Uncertainty reduction is argued to be the driving force of communication (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and is also important to discussions on trust that will come further on in this thesis (see Chapter 3).

Earlier studies of social cues relied on some assumptions, as outlined by Smith (1992). Interactions are *aspatial (*i.e. distances between subjects are inconsequential), *asynchronous* (i.e. communication does not happen simultaneously, with the exception of chat services like IRC) with the exception of applications such as chat services), is conducted over limited bandwidth therefore is mostly *textual*, and therefore is *acorporal* (communication is disembodied) and hence *astigmatic* (stigma does not happen to participants based on race, gender etc.). Smith sums it up that virtual interaction is fairly *anonymous*, based on the characteristics outlined. Theories used to study the quality of communication online hinged upon the assumption of limited social cues, such as the "cues filtered out" theories (Culnan & Markus, 1987), Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), Social Information Processing

Theory (Walther, 1992), hyperpersonal communication theory (Walther, 1996), etc. The implicit link with trust-building can be seen through the studies of Tanis and Postmes (2003) in confirming that increasing the number of social cues in CMC would reduce ambiguity and increase the positiveness of impressions formed.

Given vastly improved bandwidth and the advent of Web 2.0, technology has moved far beyond text-based communication and is offering multiple avenues of presentation of self in varying levels of media richness. The salience of the issue of anonymity varies, as we observe the rising of anchored identities (Zhao et al., 2008) whereby one's online and offline selves are linked. Besides the outdated-ness of the debate of online versus offline (Papacharissi, 2005), increased sophistication of online platforms pushes us towards the paradigm that online and offline worlds often bleed into each other (Preece & Maloney- Krichmar, 2005), existing in the same social plane. This brings consequences, as studies on online profiles of e2f websites have shown – on online dating sites, people try to balance their presentation of self in between what is attractive and what is real (Whitty & Joinson, 2009) because obvious discrepancies between the online and offline selves would raise trust issues.

In fact, in perceptions of trust, actors often attempt to anchor the online identity to the offline identity. It has been demonstrated that actors in virtual interactions build trust in relationships by engaging constantly in the authentication of identity, by ascertaining that the communication partner is indeed who he/she claims to be in real life. Slater (1998), through his study of the trading of sex pictures over IRC, outlines two major strategies used by the actors. The first is *progressive embodiment*, where the actors move the interactions to other media where communication will happen in a more embodied manner: through exchanging pictures and personal information such as addresses, talking on the phone, having video calls and eventually a face-to-face encounter. Slater's argument is that progressive embodiment "gives the other a fixed point or origin in space (an address) from which their actions can be mapped to which responsibility for those actions can be traced" (p.14). The second strategy is *object constancy*, which entails assessing the other's consistency in presence and performance over time by checking the narrative of the other.

Technological affordances are increasingly sophisticated, enabling complex social psychological processes in virtual communities. The importance of social cues remains, as users get access to better tools and bandwidth to manage and form impressions. With regards to SNSs, recent studies have turned to look at signals

propagated through online profiles. These studies move away from disembodiment of identity, and situate SNSs within social contexts of reputation and sanctions from the community. For instance, Donath and boyd (2004) link public displays of connection on SNSs as an indicator of trustworthiness, using signalling theory to explain this, i.e. the reliance of signals that are "more or less reliably correlated with an underlying quality", and some signals are perceived to be inherently reliable because of the cost involved in creating them. Signalling theory explains what keep communication honest, modelling the relationship between signals and corresponding qualities. The thesis is that when the cost of deceptively producing the signal outweighs the benefits, the signal is more reliable. This theory has been used in contexts of biology and economics – for instance, a moose's antlers waste energy, signalling that it is strong; and an expensive car wastes money, signalling that its owner is rich. A later article by Donath (2007) lists two classes of signals: assessment signals and conventional signals.

Assessment signals are inherently reliable because producing the signal requires possessing the indicated quality: for instance, lifting heavy weights would signal that one is strong. Assessment signals can be used strategically to show one's strength in a certain area. Conventional signals however are not inherently reliable because of the relative ease in which they can be indicated, such as giving personal information. One can lie about one's actual age, for instance. Conventional signals can be "kept honest" by interventions of law and social mores, which increase costs of producing a dishonest signal. Donath and boyd argue that through displaying social networks online, the user is subjected to said social mores. This increases her perceived trustworthiness. The publicly displayed social networks have the function of providing the perception that one's self-presentation is honest because of the possibility of verification, and also that her conduct is regulated by the fear of spoiling her reputation in the face of her personal community. These are subject also to the kinds of connections that she has. The connections that are most effective in ensuring a reliable presentation of identity are as such: they are real people, they know the actor, and they are in the position to impose sanctions.

Along a similar train of thought, Warranting Theory by Walther and Parks (2002) suggests that the receivers of signals on an online profile believe that signals are more trustworthy when the owner of the profile has reduced control over them. In other words, heavier weight is given to information (about the profile owner) that is

given or controlled by independent third parties. While actors try to establish trust by signalling trustworthiness, recipients of the signal too exercise agency by deciphering them. Steinmueller (2005) suggests that people filter through signals to identify which are relevant, and certain signals may become "overused, and hence ineffectual over time" (p.436), giving an example where secure connections to extract credit card information may lose their meaning when even fraudulent websites use them.

Audience may also employ passive or active strategies of uncertainty reduction through SNSs, i.e. unobtrusive observation, or active inquiry towards others (Antheunis et al., 2008). In a study of how people use the information gained from online profiles to increase interpersonal attraction, research participants were instructed to obtain the profile owner's approval and liking. After gleaning the information off the social network profiles, readers of the profile use them as *probes*, i.e. to ask questions that they already knew the answer to, or in *implicit mentions*, i.e. to mention the information surreptitiously to feign a common interest, with aims to increase interpersonal attraction (Hancock et al., 2008). These strategies do work, though the participants of the research project perceived the use of "asymmetric information" like this to be deceptive.

This brief review of the evolution of social cues and trust-building shows that studies in online communication have come a long way, from the initial dichotomy of face-to-face versus limited cues environments, to complex signalling theories linking both online and offline identities in social contexts. While the lessons learnt advance my research in the field, I have also found some gaps that should be addressed. Firstly, the concept of trust is rarely addressed in a clear theoretical framework. While many studies allude to trust, not many of them actually focus on trust as a central issue. Because trust is such a pervasive and foundational concept, especially in the field of communication, it is often assumed to exist in successful interactions. When scholars discuss various issues such as predicting friendship links (Lampe et al., 2007), increasing interpersonal attraction (Antheunis et al., 2008), or impression management in general (e.g. Signalling Theory and Warranting Theory), trust is implicit but not properly conceptualized. It is difficult to look at trust-building in a systematic manner if the concept of trust itself is not clarified (Hardin, 2006).

Secondly, the trust perspectives are deterministic and reductionist, and may be more correctly viewed as studies on indicators of trustworthiness than trust. Causal relations are simplistically drawn – more social cues will increase the level of

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trustworthiness, signals are more trustworthy if they are costly to produce or produced by third parties. While these are helpful theories, they oversimplify the issue of trust and imply direct causation – if A happens, B will happen as well. The implied certainty fails to address nuances of the social context and individual idiosyncrasies. However, these pitfalls are not unique to studies on SNSs, as many other studies in the trust literature are afflicted with the same shortcomings. Chapter 3 addresses these issues in greater depth.

Many e2f-SNSs collect publicly viewable feedback from their users about past interactions. The literature on reputation systems on C2C websites informs us that this feedback is used to cast "the shadow of the future" onto users (Axelrod, cf. Resnick et al., 2000, p.46) – "an expectation that people will consider one another's past in future interactions constrains behaviour in the present" (Resnick et al., 2000, p.46.). The history of past interactions informs others about the user's abilities and dispositions, and provides motivation for good behaviour in the present. A reputation system collects, distributes, and aggregates feedback. There are certain challenges associated with each of these functions. In collecting feedback, (1) people may not bother to provide feedback; (2) it is difficult to elicit negative feedback; and (3) the veracity of the feedback is hard to prove. While distributing feedback, (1) a member who registers another account under a different pseudonym erases all previous feedback associated with her first account; and (2) most platforms do not allow cross-platform evaluations, so a person's reputation does not extend further than one platform. Finally, on aggregating feedback, many reputations provide quantitative ratings that fail to include qualitative information such as the type of transactions (low value or high) the feedback was for, or the reputation of people providing the feedback. The characteristics of e2f-SNSs affect reputation systems (and thus the above challenges) in certain ways. For instance, in e2f-SNSs, one usually has an online identity anchored to the offline, which makes it more difficult to sever one's reputation, as compared to a pseudonymous or anonymous account. Chapter 5 explores these further.

Conclusion

In this chapter, e2f-SNSs are discussed against the backdrop of hybrid communities and the social media landscape, as a special type of SNSs that enables

people to initiate connections online, and then meet face-to-face. E2f-SNSs differ from their f2e SNS counterparts in some ways. Firstly, personal profiles are important as avenues of presentation of self, because the virtual persona represents oneself as the first point of contact in interaction. Secondly, participation in the network is usually driven by instrumental goals. Thirdly, users are matched with each other, usually through filtering the member base with certain criteria. This way of connecting (which I named "social matching" differs from conventional ways of connecting on f2e-SNSs, i.e. "social searching" or "social browsing" as proposed by Lampe et al. (2006). Fourthly, trust mechanisms are very important to indicate past experiences with other members of the system, and to authenticate one's identity to be real. Fifthly, the virtual community factor is stronger as members gather for specific functions, and grow their network online instead of mapping their offline networks online.

In terms of existing studies on trust-building in related areas, a brief traipse through the literature shows us that research on online trust focuses mostly on e-commerce, and not so much on user-to-user trust. Because of that, we turn to studies of social cues online, which allude to the topic of trust, but the studies do not conceptualize trust properly, and tend to be deterministic and reductionist. Lessons learnt from past studies therefore point towards a direction of a strong theoretical framework of trust, and a nuanced, interpretative look at trust-building on e2f-SNSs.

CHAPTER 3 – TRUST, AND TRUST IN COUCHSURFING

Suppose that you are from Singapore, and you wish to travel around Europe. You hear, through reading some magazines or from some friends who have travelled, about this website CouchSurfing.org, where people host travellers for free and sometimes act as local guides for them. Intrigued, you register an account and set up a profile. You put up some basic demographic information about yourself, some pictures, a self-description, and fill in various other fields asking for your mission in life at the moment, the most amazing thing you've seen and done, your favourite books and movies, locations that you've travelled, languages that you speak, etc. A few weeks before you leave for your trip to Europe, you start looking for potential hosts through CouchSurfing. You key in "Berlin" as a location into the search engine, and browse through a long list of people who reside in the city (see Figure 3.1). Overwhelmed by the sheer number of people on the list, you do a filtered search, specifying the age range and gender that you prefer, or through keywords like "vegetarian" or "cats".

You then end up with a shorter list of people who have couches to offer. You click through the profiles one by one, and choose a few that you think would be good hosts, based on whatever criteria that you have in mind. For instance, you may be an independent traveller and hence a host who doesn't have much time for you may be a good fit. Or, it may also work the other way around whereby you are looking to spend time with your host to have some cultural exchange, so you would look for someone who would show you around the city. It can be that you want to stay very near the city centre, and the host's place is in a strategic location. Or perhaps you are looking for someone who would respond quickly to requests, hence you look at the response rate (100% is good, 50% is bad). There is a lot of information that can be picked up in the profile.

Having shortlisted some people to contact, you start by sending them requests. In some profiles, it is stated that the profile owner prefers personalized requests. You then write some information about yourself, and your plans, and the reason that you want to stay with the host. (There is a two-part request form that can guide you along, under the headings "About Me" and "Why I'd like to meet you".) You specify the number of people coming, the timeframe that you are requesting, and how you will

arrive (by plane, metro, etc.). You then wait for the potential hosts to reply to your request. Assuming that one does, positively, the next step is to get the directions to the host's place, and you are all set to go.

Figure 3-1 Searching for couches in Berlin

Figure 3-2 Examples of "couches" all over the world, extracted from the CouchSurfing website

As you can imagine, from the host's perspective it is rather similar, in setting up the profile and providing vital information. An additional field that is very important in the host's profile is the "Couch Information". By CouchSurfing terms, a couch can mean anything from floor space to a guest bedroom. Figure 3.2 shows some examples of some real life couches, extracted from the website. You can also look at an example of couch information provided in Appendix A. One tweaks the availability of the couch to say "yes", "maybe", "not right now but I can hang out" or "I'm travelling"[10]. The couch information contains practical information, such as the location of the host's place (be it in the city centre or in the middle of the woods), sleeping arrangements (Shared room? Shared sleeping surface? On a bed or on a couch? Sheets provided? etc.), children or pets in the house and so on. The host can also write her expectations of the interaction. For instance, that she wishes to host no more than 3 nights, or that she is available during the weekends to show the surfer around, or that she prefers that the guest bring a gift from his home country. After

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[10]Note that the field of couch availability has undergone some transformations throughout the years. It used to be that one could select "Definitely!" if she was very enthusiastic about hosting; and for a very long time the field of "Not right now but I can hang out" was divided into "No" and "Coffee or drinks".

setting up a profile, the host waits for someone to send her a request. A request comes in. She looks at the request and the profile, and decides whether she would like to open her door to this surfer. She then accepts, rejects or says "maybe" to the request.[11]

According to Bialski (2007), the typical CouchSurfing process has three stages beyond a successful online connection – the Introduction stage, where the surfer and host meet and launch into commonplace conversations, usually involving biographical details. The second stage, the Insight stage, is when the conversation goes deeper and more intense, where one or both CouchSurfers delve into "their own life, the lives of others around them, their personal history, their experiences, their problems, or their failures" (p.48). The last stage, the Embedding Stage, is when the CouchSurfers have to break up and they will decide whether or not they will maintain the friendship created. CouchSurfers are encouraged to leave references, or publicly viewable feedback, after the face-to-face interaction. The references are displayed on the online profiles and build up the online reputation of the CouchSurfer, indicating her trustworthiness to the rest of the community.

There are obvious trust issues here, as it involves two strangers meeting in the privacy of one's home. In August 2009, a Moroccan host was charged with raping a 29 year old female CouchSurfer from Hong Kong, while she was staying at his place in the United Kingdom. He was convicted and sentenced to ten years in jail.[12] The action taken by CouchSurfing.org was to delete the offender's profile after receiving formal allegations in August. Further trawling through the community forums of CouchSurfing.org revealed that there were other cases of alleged crimes but few have been reported officially to local law enforcement agencies. An interesting blog post by Tom Casady, a police chief in Lincoln, Nebraska of the United States reveals potential deviants who are members of CouchSurfing.org:

> "[…] I jumped on CouchSurfing.com, put in a few parameters, and rendered a list of available hosts in Lincoln. I found an interesting guy who specified in his profile 'no cigarette smoking.' He's been arrested four times by my officers for smoking or possession of marijuana, though, and we have a slew of intelligence information about him dealing in various controlled substance.

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[11]At the late stages of this writing, CouchSurfing started providing a feature which appears to be a reverse couch request. Surfers can send out an open itinerary to broadcast a request, and hosts can extend invitations to these open requests. However, since this feature was not present at the time of data collection and it conceivably works in a similar way, I have chosen to omit it in most of the discussions.
[12] "Man jailed over 'CouchSurfing' rape", http://www.smh.com.au/travel/travel-news/man-jailed-over-CouchSurfing-rape-20091030-hogg.html accessed on 1/8/12

I also found a registered sex offender offering his sofa. This particular guy was convicted of a felony count of child enticement, when he tried to romance what he thought was a 13 year old girl, and arranged to meet her to consummate the relationship. The forensic examination of his personal computer was rather interesting.

Another prospective couch host was taken into emergency custody by our officers quite recently after threatening to shoot himself."

Nonetheless, he did not denounce CouchSurfing as a platform for budget travel and meeting people. Instead, he advised CouchSurfers to "take advantage of the free resources for background checks, email some of the references, don't go it alone if you can help it, and bring your own sleeping bag: never know what's been on that couch." As the virtual identity is the first point of contact online, one cannot be sure if the person behind the profile is not a drug pusher, a sex offender, suicidal, or just an unpleasant person in general. How, then, does one make the leap of faith from online to offline? The next section looks into the theoretical framework of trust that would lay the foundation for answering this question.

What is Trust?

"Trust means… I guess trust means that, you're allowed to be vulnerable with somebody. […] I mean, you let down your guard, and you allow yourself to be in a position to be hurt by somebody. But you trust that they won't hurt you. So in other words, when you're CouchSurfing, you've got all your stuff here, you know, in the middle of the night, people could just kill you in your sleep or they could take your passport, they could steal all your belongings, or vice versa. Your host could be a psycho guy. So you have allowed yourself to be put into a position where the other person can hurt you, whether that's mentally, physically, financially, whatever. But you do it anyway, knowing that they could potentially hurt you, and I think that's trust." (Respondent #3)

The above quote illustrates the meaning of trust given by a respondent that is close to what is described in the literature. In a widely accepted definition, Rousseau et al. (1998, p.385) explain that trust is "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or the behaviour of another." The critical components here are "positive expectations" and the "the intention to accept vulnerability". Möllering goes on to refine the understanding of "accepting vulnerability" as stated by Rousseau et al., explaining that accepting vulnerability does not mean that trustors are willing to be hurt. Instead, trustors have "highly optimistic expectations that vulnerability is not a problem and no harm will be done" (2006, p.9).

A simple breakdown of trust as a three-part relation, as provided by Hardin (2006), is: A trusts B to do, or with respect to, X. Hardin argues that every trust relationship is comprised of these three parts: the trustor, the trustee and the contextual element. To further concretize the concept, there are five key themes to trust (Bhattacharya, Devinney & Pillutla, 1998, p.461-462). Firstly, trust amidst uncertainty and risk, without which the concept would be trivial. Secondly, trust reflects expectancy, a prediction of the trustee's behaviour. That prediction, made in the context of irremovable uncertainty, ultimately involves a leap of faith. Thirdly, it is argued that any definition of trust must account for the strength and importance of trust. Fourthly, trust is situation and person specific, in other words, context must be taken into account. Lastly, the expected outcome of trusting behaviour is generally positive or nonnegative. Putting these together, trust can be viewed as "an expectancy of positive (or nonnegative) outcomes that one can receive based on the expected action of another party in an interaction characterized by uncertainty."

It has been stated that trust may be one of the most difficult concepts to study empirically (Misztal, 1996). Most of the empirical studies on trust have been done with surveys and experiments, which have not been too useful in generating scholastic knowledge (Hardin, 2006). The problem is conceptual and methodological. Both gaming experiments and surveys are not clear about what is being measured, and the concept of trust is not clearly defined, often treated as an a-theoretical term – or, as put by Hardin, most research have been "driven by no theoretical conception of trust beyond a seat-of-the-pants sense that we must all know what it is" (ibid, p.72). Hardin argues further that trust game experiments are removed from reality and thus is ill-equipped to understand trust in a nuanced, everyday manner; whereas surveys are often too vague to yield clear conclusions. This is supported by an example given by Miller and Mitamura (2003) who show how a popular survey question[13] on generalized trust conflates trust with caution, and that differences in levels of safety in an environment strongly affect survey results. To sum up his views on survey and experimental trust research, Hardin states that "there is relatively little to learn about trust from these two massive research programs".

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[13] The question reads: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" with a choice out of two answers: "Most people can be trusted; Can't be too careful".

Therefore, Möllering (2006) recommends an interpretative approach to study trust. He states:

> "It requires a *process perspective*, obtaining a rich (typically qualitative) picture of actual *trust experiences*, understanding the *embeddedness* of the relationships under investigation and taking into account the *reflexivity* not only in trust development as such but also in the research interaction itself. The general orientation should be to get away from measuring predefined variables and get closer to the respondents' idiosyncratic experiences and interpretations." (p.152, emphasis in original)

Cogent elaborations are provided to back Möllering's recommendations. Firstly, he argues that manifestations of trust can only be understood against the background and history of that relationship, hence a process perspective is very important to ground the study, instead of just at one moment in time. Secondly, trust is highly idiosyncratic and encompasses specific knowledge, attributions, and irreducible faith of the actors involved, and this can best be studied through rich, qualitative descriptions. It is recommended that both sides of the trust dyad should be studied. Thirdly, trust development processes and relationships are always embedded in a larger context, and researchers should devote time to study the general situation of the respondents and their relationships to get a clearer picture, as well as the trust relationship against other relationships of the actors. Fourthly, trust research should be reliant on the interpretations of the actors. This raises some challenges for the researcher: first, in most forms of investigations the actors' interpretations are triggered by the researcher, which would bias the response in an uncontrollable way; and second, the researcher's interpretations of the responses would also form a second layer of distortions. However, as trust research in general is difficult to pin down, being vigilant towards these potential pitfalls would be a form of mitigation.

From the literature, I have found Möllering's theoretical framework the most useful to view trust in a holistic way, and matches most closely to the empirical observations gathered in my pilot study. The next section will describe the framework in detail, as foundation for a systematic dissection for trust-building. For clarity, in a trust relationship (A trusts B), A is referred to as the trustor, and B is a trustee.

The Theoretical Framework of Trust

Perhaps a somewhat controversial starting point to consider is the idea that for trustors, good reasons (to trust) do not always lead to trust, and trust does not always need good reasons (Möllering, 2001). This notion is quite different from many prevailing ideas on trust that presumes a direct link between trustworthiness and trust. Trust exists even when the bases of trust are weak, and it is not necessarily rational. There is a further element of a "transcendental, quasi-religious nature in trust" that enables the leap of faith. Through studying the works of Georg Simmel in relation to trust, Möllering arrives to a conclusion that *"trust combines good reasons with faith"* (Möllering, 2001, p.411, emphasis in original).

There are many thoughts to be unpacked from this statement. "Good reasons" can be anything ranging from calculative to intuitive, such as the rationalization of "he will not steal my television because it's of no use to a traveller", or the feeling that "he seems like a good person, he will not hurt me". However, that alone is not enough, as one needs to live with the fact that there are missing information and gaps in knowledge, along with the good reasons for trust. For instance, it can never be certain if the trustee is having intentions other than what is proclaimed, or if vital information is withheld from the trustor. The "faith" element facilitates this leap into the unknown, so that actors behave as if the uncertainty is favourably resolved and have positive expectations of the outcomes. It is with these two elements, good reasons and faith, that one is able to trust.

In his earlier work (2001), Möllering condenses this notion of trust with a simple model of 3 parts: interpretation, suspension and expectation. Interpretation of the situation is the assembly of good reasons to trust (or the lack of thereof, which may lead to distrust). Suspension is defined as "the mechanism that brackets out uncertainty and ignorance, thus making interpretative knowledge momentarily 'certain' and enabling the leap to favourable (or unfavourable) expectation" (Giddens 1991, cited from Möllering 2001). The expectation in this case is the "output" of the trust process – positive expectation leads to trust, and when one has negative expectations one does not trust. The idea of trust, put figuratively, is

> "the mental process of leaping – enabled by suspension – across the gorge of the unknowable from the land of interpretation into the land of expectation. [...] Once the mental leap across has been accomplished and a state of favourable (or unfavourable) expectation is reached, the process continues and

the land of expectation becomes the land of interpretation from which the gorge will soon need to be crossed again." (Möllering, 2001)
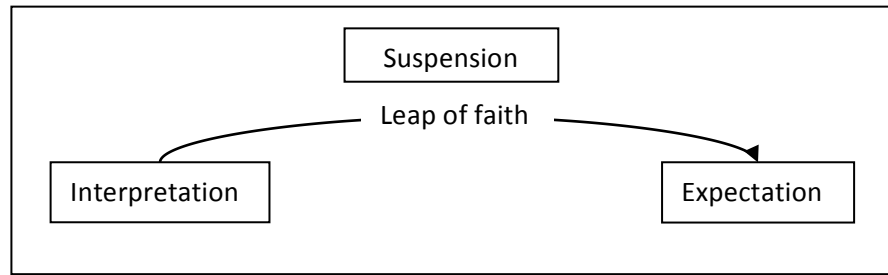
Figure 3-3 Visualization of three-part trust model of Möllering (2001)

To explain this with a concrete example, in a typical CouchSurfing context, the host receives the request and the profile of a potential guest. She reads through the request and the profile, and forms certain ideas about the surfer. She has no way of knowing certain details of the surfer, such as the level of personal hygiene, or if the surfer may be lying about certain details on the profile. Although she does not have all that information, she makes the leap of faith to believe that this stranger will be a pleasant guest. The trust process happens when one forms certain interpretations based on the information available, and suspends the awareness of uncertainty and vulnerability. The state of favourable expectation is the successful outcome of the trust process, when one trusts. It is entirely possible of course for her to arrive at an unfavourable expectation, for instance if she reads negative references about a potential guest, and interprets that he is a sex offender.

Thus we have a preliminary understanding of how trust works. In Möllering's book on trust published in 2006, this idea was further refined into a framework in the form of a Trust Wheel, as pictured in Figure 3.4. In this book, Möllering takes on the extensive task of combing the literature on trust, and categorizing them into three major branches, i.e. reason, routine and reflexivity. Combined, these three paradigms make up the interpretative arm of the previous model. Suspension connects these "good reasons" to the positive expectation that is trust. I shall give an overview of Möllering's arguments.

Figure 3-4 Trust Wheel, from Möllering (2006)
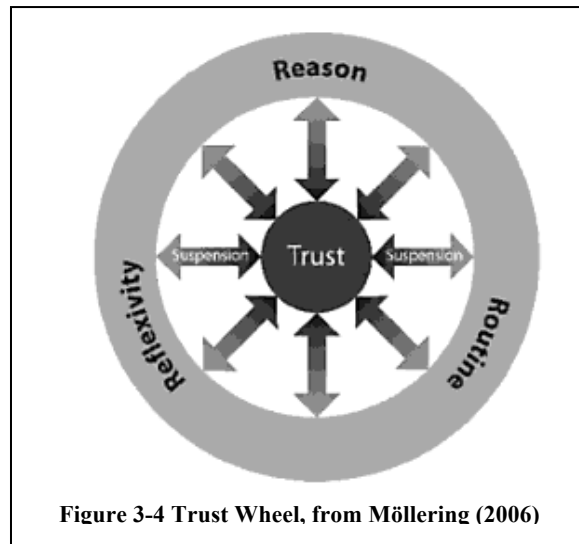
Reason is the rationalist paradigm that people trust based on judging the trustworthiness of the other party. An important proponent of this view is Russell Hardin (2002) and his view of "encapsulated interest" in trust, i.e. the trustor believes that the trustee has interest in keeping the trustor's trust. Often this is in the interest of maintaining a beneficial relationship from the point of view of the trustee. Research on game theories such as the prisoner's dilemma also falls under the umbrella of reason. Rationalists put much emphasis on the assessment of indicators of trustworthiness. An example of an indicator of trustworthiness is the number of friend links on one's profile – for instance, a profile with many friend links is perceived to be more trustworthy than a profile with none.

Möllering puts forth some salient arguments on the pitfalls of studies on trust indicators. Firstly, he argues that the focus on trust indicators might actually render the concept of trust superfluous, because it implies that trust is nothing more than a "perception of trustworthiness" (p. 48). Secondly, indicators of trustworthiness may mislead us to think that it is easy for trustors to make the assessment on trustworthiness, when in many cases they may lack adequate information, or have unreliable sources. Thirdly, trustors receive mixed signals of trustworthiness as well as untrustworthiness. Most researchers only consider indicators of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness, and rarely acknowledge the fact that both may be present, and trustors would need to consider both in their assessments. Fourthly, indicators of trustworthiness suggest that trust is static, which is not the case, because the relationship between trustor and trustee entails a continuous reassessment of trust.Lastly, Möllering argues that the focus on the indicators puts undue emphasis on

the trustee on his portrayal of certain characteristics, whereas the trustor's position is neglected.

Moving on to the second base of trust: routine is the "taken-for-grantedness" of trust, its source being presumably reliable institutions, traditions, cultural norms, social realities and other relatively stable entities. People trust based on shared expectations, because they can conceive of no alternatives. An example is a pedestrian who walks on the sidewalk with ease because he/she trusts that vehicles would not deviate from the road to knock him/her down. Möllering goes on to describe sociological theories on routine, such as Schütz's concept of the natural attitude (1967), Garfinkel's breaching experiments (1963, 1967), and the definition of social reality by institutions (Zucker, 1977, 1983, 1987; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Rules, roles and routines are structured by institutions and thus institutions become an object of trust. However, this view undermines the agency of the actors (Misztal, 1996) and continues to neglect the origin of the trust with respect to institutions. In other words: "Where do trust routines come from? Who influences them? What is the role of those using them? And how do the consequences of trust routines feed back into their institution?" (Möllering, 2006, p.75)

Some researchers adopt the third approach, in terms of trust as a reflexive process, where actors work together to build trust gradually. Trust-building models have been built, such as Spiral Reinforcement Model of Trust (Zand, 1972), Process Framework of the Development of Cooperative Interorganizational relationships (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994), Initial Trust Formation Model (McKnight et al., 1998), etc. These models account for feedback, and trust is built by "extensive signalling, communication, interaction and interpretation in order to maintain the continuous process of trust constitution" (Möllering, 2006, p.79). Trustors may start by acting *as if* the trustee is trustworthy, and build up trust in continued interaction. Different types of trust may enact in the process of trust-building, for instance "calculus-based trust" in the beginning, based on rationalist views of trust; and further on "knowledge-based trust" which hinges on sufficient information collected to produce predictability on the other's actions; and eventually "identification-based trust" where actors understand and appreciate each other's wants and intentions (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996).

Möllering's thesis is that although these studies have attempted to explain trust, they have somehow missed the point. Firstly, if trust is viewed as a matter of a rational choice, there is a paradox that if trust can be entirely explained by reason, the element

of trust would be superfluous. (In which case, there would be no uncertainty, and therefore no need to trust.) Secondly, if trust is something that is taken-for-granted, based on existing institutions, where did that trust come from? And thirdly, if trust is an ongoing reflexive process in which trust is built eventually, this element of certainty that trust will be built would also render the idea of trust redundant. Trust combines good reasons with faith. "The trick is not just to be able to live with weak interpretative knowledge of one kind or another, but to suspend contradiction and ignorance as well," states Möllering (2001, p.415).

Möllering then refines the term of "suspension", also known as the leap of faith, as "the process that enables actors to deal with irreducible uncertainty and vulnerability. Suspension is the essence of trust, because trust as a state of positive expectation of others can only be reached when reason, routine and reflexivity are combined with suspension." (2006, p.110) It is suspension that links reason, routine and reflexivity to trust, and trust thrives in an environment where there is irreducible uncertainty and vulnerability. Actors of trust have to take a leap of faith knowing that there is risk involved. Möllering suggests three major ways to come to terms with suspension. The first is "trust as fiction", suggesting that the trustor and trustee work together to create fiction in the trustor's mind, to enable him to trust. The second is what he terms as "bracketing", i.e. actors manage to live with the fact that there are gaps and missing pieces, and make the leap of faith anyway. The third, "the will to believe", posits that the actor exercises agency through his will to either suspend uncertainty and vulnerability or not.

Möllering's framework of trust is holistic and provides a viable handle to explain the idiosyncrasies of trust actors. Other scholars have found Möllering's model to be useful (e.g. Brownlie & Howson, 2005), and his book on trust was also critically acclaimed by various researchers (Kidd, 2006; Nooteboom, 2006). This conceptual framework will guide this study and I will base the actions of the actors on the assumption of irreducible uncertainty, to explore the interpretations of the actors within the system.

Building Narratives of Trustworthiness on E2f-SNSs

This section will explain the core premise of my thesis, built upon the theoretical framework of Möllering. I will explain the rationale behind the adoption of the approach of narrative inquiry, and map out the implications on data analysis.

A recap so far – trust is summarized by Möllering to be "an ongoing process of building on reason, routine and reflexivity, suspending irreducible social vulnerability and uncertainty as if they were favourably resolved, and maintaining thereby a state of favourable expectation towards the actions and intentions of more or less specific others" (Möllering, 2006, p. 111). It goes without saying that the three bases of trust, the "good reasons" of reason, routine and reflexivity should be looked into, but these are not the most central to trust-building, as mentioned before – good reasons do not necessarily lead to trust. What I find to be more interesting is the processes of suspension, for dealing with irreducible vulnerability, which ultimately links the good reasons with the outcome of trust. This focus deals directly with the facilitation of the leap of faith, the essence of trust, which is closer to the processes of trust-building.

According to Möllering, as discussed before, there are three main ways that people cope with irreducible vulnerability or uncertainty. Actors can 1) create fiction to fill in the incomplete pieces of information, filling the gaps between what is known and what is unknown; or 2) bracket out the missing pieces of information and live with the fact that they exist; or 3) have the will to trust, through an element of faith, believing even when there is no conclusive evidence. From three of these, I argue that in the context of e2f-SNSs, it is the first that should be focused on and expanded upon. Firstly, SNSs are indeed avenues of presentation of self, and provide the tools of narration through multiple features. Secondly, "bracketing" and the will of trust depend highly upon the individual characteristics of the users of the system, which are important in affecting the trust-building process, but are not relevant for the case at hand, the social media platform. Although they should be taken into account, there are limited avenues of observation or development of these from the perspective of the platform. Therefore I believe that it is more productive to look at the socio-technical processes enabling the creation of the fiction to build trust for the trustor, as the main mechanism for the purposes of the e2f-SNS.

What is fiction? Among other definitions, the Collins English Dictionary explains that fiction is "an invented story or explanation". In other words, a fiction is a narrative of an imagined scenario, the narrative being a story that "connects events

into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story" (Riessman, 2008). In this case, "fiction" as used by Möllering and as interpreted by me does not refer to stories that are not true and do not exist. Instead, the narratives are based on information and events perceived as "real", and form the actor's reality, and are "fictional" insofar that the actors construct them by filling in the blanks with plausible imagined scenarios. There are concerns raised about the terminology - Bold (2012, p.145), for example, prefers to refer to this type of fiction as "representative construction". However, introducing a new term may be confusing, and since I am using the theoretical framework of Möllering, it makes sense not to alter the terminology. For clarity, I focus on studying the narrative, and not the fictionality of it.

There are several functions for the narrative, as detailed by Riessman. It can be used to remember, argue, justify, persuade, engage, entertain, and even mislead an audience. In the analogy mentioned before: to trust, the actor makes a leap of faith from the land of interpretation to the land of positive expectation. The narrative aids in narrowing the gap by painting the landscape *as if* the gap is bridged, *as if* the uncertainty and vulnerability are not problematic, *as if* the scenario of positive expectation has been reached. The narrative of imagined reality is indeed a powerful tool that paints the uncertain as certain, and facilitates trust in the manner of enabling the trustor to live as if certain rationally possible futures will not occur (Lewis and Weigert, 1985). There are some questions then that arise, for instance – what sort of narrative is created? Who creates this narrative? How is the narrative created? How does this narrative contribute to trust-building? In what cases does the narrative fail to facilitate the leap of faith? How can we systematically study the building of the narrative?

Möllering argues that "a holistic fiction can be created from incomplete pieces of information by reference to the 'as if'" (ibid, p.115). He discusses briefly the number of ways that the narrative of trustworthiness is constructed. The concept of "overdrawn information" as introduced by Luhmann (1979, cf. Möllering, 2006) explains that trustors make inferences from limited information available to "serve as a springboard into uncertainty". This idea sits comfortably with the notion of e2f-SNSs as vehicles for presentation of self. The trustee plays an important role in helping the trustor create this fiction, through presenting herself and providing vital information about herself and about the situation. Beyond the individual level, socially constructed

reality (such as myths and ceremonies, and other shared symbols of intersubjective reality within a community) contribute in creating the metanarrative, which the trustors rely on as bases of the imagined scenarios of positive outcomes.

The main contribution of the thesis is to systematically study trust-building from the angle of creating trustworthy narratives in the setting of an e2f-SNS. The narratives of trustworthiness aid trustors in dealing with the uncertainties and make trusting decisions. I analyze the narratives from two angles: how the content is formed, and the tools with which the narratives are communicated. On the content, I look at factors that steer the direction of the narrative created and add detail and nuances, both from the macro and the micro level. As I will proceed to demonstrate further on, the actors' trusting behaviours are highly idiosyncratic and complex, as they operate with different interpretations of what the system is, and have different expectations of the outcomes of the interactions. This is expected, as trust is contextual and dynamic, and should not be reduced to a simplistic causal relation – an ultimate narrative of trustworthiness that reliably leads to trust. However, through looking at the factors that form the narrative, we should be able to come up with a fairly good understanding of why and how people think and trust the way that they do.

The narrative serves the function of propelling the trustor into the unknown as if the uncertainty is unproblematic. Because it is purposeful as such, the trustor tailors the narrative to suit her need – if she needs more information to make the leap of faith, the narrative is more elaborate; it can also be the case that she is comfortable in dealing with uncertainty, so the narrative is bare-boned and succinct. Each actor comes with a different set of cultural upbringing, social class, world view, attitude, etc. and this complex combination varies the narrative built, and the narrative needed to trust. There is no one-size-fits-all. The point is not to find out the exact content and structure of the narrative, but to look at what are the common factors that form the narratives and how they are linked to the trust-building process.

"I was a bit nervous about it, 'coz for all the worries you could imagine, so it took a small leap of faith there. I was like, ok, I'm just gonna hope it works out, and I just hope that when I walked off that plane, and get on that taxi, that guy really does meet me, and he really does have an apartment and he does really have a place for me, and I don't have to be scrambling for a hotel at the last minute. In a city that I'm not familiar with, that I don't know. So that was a little scary." (Respondent #3)

Having clarified the theoretical framework used for trust, we return to the field of CouchSurfing. Other researchers have studied the trust on CouchSurfing from different perspectives. Rosen et al. (2011) looked at the sense of belonging and trust in CouchSurfing, and found that trust in CouchSurfing increases as people host more. Face-to-face gatherings also increased the sense of belonging to the community, and social capital of the members. Bialski's (2007) study of friendships based on CouchSurfing brings up an interesting point relating trust and space. Based on Actor Network Theory, which argues that inanimate objects have agency created by meaningful interpretation, Bialski explains that space becomes an actor, instead of being only a setting for action to take place. In the CouchSurfing framework, where time spent together is typically limited, space is the factor that builds trust. In her ethnographic study, she elaborates:

"Just as [Actor Network Theory] suggests, this apartment was now a space of meaning, an actor which allowed me to behave in a certain way, and having a close, intimate discussion with a relative stranger made me in no way feel awkward because I was already intimately acquainted with an actor (her apartment) who she was intimately acquainted with, quite similarly to a triadic system of trust, where I would feel closer to a friend-of-a-friend than with a complete stranger. In Sara's case, the apartment was that friend-of-a-friend whom I had already met." (ibid, p. 58)

Space also creates a context for expected behaviour – the host expects the guest to act a certain way in his/her area of control, and the guest honours the trust and respects the host's ownership and control of the space; both trust each other not to harm themselves within the space. With both actors behaving in a predictable manner, trust is then able to be built and accumulated in a relatively short time span. To expand on her point, Bialski draws upon the CouchSurfing database, showing that CouchSurfers who met through hosting/surfing activities tend to have higher trust in each other, compared with CouchSurfers who met through activities or gatherings in public spaces. To this she attributes the importance of the meeting being held at a

meaningful space, i.e. the host's home and personal territory instead of in a public, less intimate space. A later study by Bialski and Batorski (2011) looks at the online communication as well, arguing that trust is built through social navigation in the online and offline contexts of CouchSurfing. Social navigation is a method of extracting or extrapolating information from tracing others' activities, such as inferring that the food at a restaurant is good if it has a queue outside, or simply just reading reviews. Through affordances of the website and further interactions online, users build trust through building familiarity and attract homophilous site members.

It is important to understand the trust context, and the actors' interpretations of it. When I first entered the field, I made the assumption that most concerns on trust would surround issues of personal safety, on rape, robbery or various other criminal acts. This is a somewhat reasonable assumption, commonly made by outsiders, since these are the normal worries of non-users or new users of the system. However, after talking to the respondents, it became apparent that the views towards trust and risk are quite idiosyncratic. While one respondent emphatically said, "For you to be able to go in and close your eyes and sleep with a stranger in your house, man, it's trust" (Respondent #2); another said that "I don't really worry about security or the safety, because it seems like, so natural that, the person is trustworthy somehow. I haven't thought about it. I don't worry about it, I guess." (Respondent #7) CouchSurfers were generally considered as trustworthy, though it is often emphasized that one should read the profiles carefully before making any trusting decision to host or to surf.

I have found that the manner of which profiles are read also varies. Every CouchSurfer has his/her own way of making judgments about trustworthiness. References are most widely referred to; even so, a CouchSurfer has admitted that he occasionally "forgets" to read the references, after going through the personal description and pictures. Some put pictures as a must for profiles, some do not look at pictures. Some read the entire profile diligently, some just skim through and prefer to leave their judgment to the face-to-face encounter. There are other bits of information considered as important by individual CouchSurfers, such as humour, perceived friendliness, etc.

Upon probing (through the question, "do you think that CouchSurfing involves a lot of trust?"), it was unanimously agreed that doing CouchSurfing does involves trust – at least, the interview participants interpreted their acts as acts of trust. When asked to elaborate about trust, responses were varied and hesitant, as most respondents

had not thought about what trust actually meant to them. Here are some of the responses:

> "Trust, it means that I can share everything with another person, and I can be free, I can just do and say whatever I want, and I can count on him or her. I know that he or she can do whatever he wants, and I won't feel bad about anything. It's like freedom. [...] It's knowing the other person and to have the security to do whatever I want and I know that I won't disappoint the other person." (Respondent #7)

> "Trust is feeling safe, and feeling safe enough to open yourself to other people, other things, like, new people, new experiences, new cultures, new way of life, to feel safe enough and comfy enough. To be yourself. Yeah, I think it's about feeling safe, it's very important. Where no one will harass you any way, and you will feel comfy and peaceful." (Respondent #13)

> "Trust, as its foundation, I think, to me is mutual respect. You recognize the other person as, in the case of CouchSurfing, is another person with needs, social needs, physical needs such as food and shelter and you do your best to provide them. The surfer in return to complete that sort of trust, doesn't just not do anything bad to your house, but in return, gives something in return and there are some sort of exchange that is part of the trust on CouchSurfing, there will be an exchange whether culturally or socially or personally." (Respondent #31)

From the responses, it can be seen that trust is defined in relation to what the respondents prize, be it relationships, value systems, personal well-being, or respect. The importance of trust is explicitly or implicitly expressed. It is generally regarded that trust is something good, as some incorporate trust as part of their identity, as being trusting as a person; a catalyst to certain acts such as giving out the house keys; as basis to a relationship etc. Trust is also discerning, not "blind" (Respondent #6); it is something dynamic and contextual. It is noteworthy that CouchSurfers appear to be clear that the trust in operation within the context of CouchSurfing does not apply elsewhere, because "not everybody is a CouchSurfer" (Respondent #14). It is also specific to the act of surfing or hosting, and does not extend further to lending money, for example.

The trust context depends on how one perceives the system, and what one expects to get out of the interactions. Why do people do CouchSurfing? This question can be approached from two angles. The first: what motivates people to host, or to stay with complete strangers from foreign places? And the second: what are the "good reasons" to trust that are perceived by CouchSurfers, which may differ from an

outsider's speculation of possible disasters that could happen in such an interaction? These questions are important for looking at trust in CouchSurfing. The former gives us insight to the expectations that CouchSurfers have of their interactions, and the latter sheds light on their interpretations of why CouchSurfing is a good idea, thus already making a leap of faith in adopting it. As interpretations and expectations are two components of the trust framework by Möllering (2001), understanding them is the first step towards understanding trust-building.

What motivates people to do CouchSurfing?

The changing face of tourism and mobility in a post-modern world forms the backdrop to the CouchSurfing phenomenon, where sightseeing may take a backseat while forming connections with locals increases in priority. These social connections are utilitarian in nature, as they fulfil the CouchSurfers' need for intimacy in modern society, and aid self-discovery of identity by facilitating discourse. Bialski (2007) finds that personal growth appears to be a common motivation to do CouchSurfing. Most of her survey respondents of 3,000 users answered that personal development or growth is very important to them. To her question of their primary motivation to travel, 56% of the respondents chose personal growth, as opposed to only 17.7% (the second highest group of respondents) choosing "meeting and building relationships with people from around the world". Bialski argues that "it is the quest for personal growth which fuels connections between people and not the other way around" (p.37).

Bialski (2007) coins the term "Intimate Tourists" to refer to CouchSurfers who have intrinsic need to connect with locals with deeper motivations such as engaging with other cultures and generating goodwill. Peace-building and expanding cross-cultural understandings are goals; travel is a life mission rather than for recreational purposes. By reiterating who they are in conversations with other members, CouchSurfers are able to reinstate or readjust their identity. However, not all CouchSurfers are "Intimate Tourists". Different types of CouchSurfers have different travelling patterns and motivations to do CouchSurfing. Loosely extending Cohen's typology of tourists, Heesakkers (2008) proposes a typology of five kinds of CouchSurfers to differentiate the ways in which CouchSurfers are submerged in the CouchSurfing lifestyle. There is the Virtual Surfer who only uses the CouchSurfing platform for online discussion in forum groups, and the Recreational Surfer who casually embraces the ideology of CouchSurfing and uses it for short budget trips and

making friends. The Experimental Surfer focuses on creating friendships among surfers from his/her local area, to connect with people that share same interests. The Slow Surfer tries to live as a local during his/her travels and travels slowly to immerse him/herself in foreign culture, hoping to connect to the place, people and culture. Lastly, there is the Adventure and Drifting Surfer who feels alienated from his/her own society and searches for authenticity in the lives of others.

There are many reasons why CouchSurfing would appeal to one – like meeting new people, learning about other cultures, getting insider travel tips from locals, travelling low budget, and satisfying curiosity about CouchSurfing (Heesakkers, 2008). From my own data, one can get a nuanced glimpse of why people host and surf. Exhibit 3.1 shows some of the responses. For CouchSurfing as a traveller, some people surf to immerse themselves in different cultures, some surf to meet like-minded, open-minded people. Saving money is often mentioned by surfers, and hosts enjoy having the company of travellers without having to travel themselves. Sometimes the motivations run deeper, in reinforcing one's optimistic views towards trust in humanity.

From surfers:

"I think it's not really just about the bed, not just about a free place to crash, and it's definitely nice that you meet people, and then you get a deeper appreciation or deeper experience with this place that you travel to, that you're not just going there on surface to the touristy places, or the food places or stuff like that, you know, the tourist stuff on the guidebooks are really nice, but you're just getting... you're just skimming, like a rock skipping across the pond. You're not actually like, being immersed in the culture, and in the lifestyles of people. I'm not saying that CouchSurfing for two or three days can give you that, but I think it can give you a deeper appreciation for hey, this is how some people live. And this is some of the culture. When you spend some time with your host, when you talk, you get a good appreciation for their point of view and their perspective, and how they see the world, and that's what it is. That's why I want to travel. I want to travel because I want to see cool things and sights, but in the end, you know, I want to experience the culture, and how are you going to do that if you don't know anybody from that culture, you know what I mean?" (Respondent #3)

"I think the main motivation was because the people [that do CouchSurfing] are so different to what your impression is about the Swiss people. Like, they're really open-minded, they're warmer... hard to say, I don't know. [...] It's the spirit of these people, it's different. And what I found out, like, with all the surfers that I have, most of them, it doesn't matter where they come from, they're all very similar. I mean, I met one girl from Israel, she was surfing my couch, and I had a completely different opinion about Israelis, and after that she said she's not a typical Israeli. Like, normal Israelis are not so... they're more like, close-minded or something. Not open to the whole world. And

I think these people are a different type of man." (Respondent #5)

"Saving money I think." (Respondent #7)

"It's a very good feeling when you come to a strange place and there's a person who knows you and knows about you. So, the place you are going is not so strange or foreign. You meet this person and make a connection with him/her, and if it's a good experience you have a good feeling from it. And it's also a good way to save money, and don't feel so alone when you travel by yourself." (Respondent #6)

From hosts

"Why, because my ex- companion and I, we have a shared custody of our girls. It means that I have them 8 days out of 14, and she has them the remaining 6 days. That means that this place is big enough to host 2 more people, but I just have them half of the time. So half of the time, I've got 2 beds that are empty. That's why. There's a second reason. It's because when I divorced, I felt very much alone. And I knew from – I was told at that time that it would take a long time to get a new companion, and to build a new life. The first 3 months were exhilarating. I said, I'm free! Very soon, after 3 months, I said [makes slumping motion] - this is not funny. I am alone. And I just don't like it. And I told myself, I've got 3 rooms, and I'm alone. Hey, why not host people? Simple." (Respondent #19)

"Well, it was just that I had the space, and yeah, I was interested in meeting people. I thought that it was really the kind of trust-building relationship that this world needs to become a better place, this sort of reciprocity in not commercial relationships. That's what I like. And, also not necessarily the immediate reciprocal thing, let's say I host you, but doesn't mean that you have to host me back, you know, and I am doing it pretty much because, not so much because I expect that someone else will host me possibly, but because I enjoy hosting you." (Respondent #16)

"The main motivation [for my family to agree to CouchSurfing] was, maybe if I have many people around me from other cultures, I might not be – there's a German word that I cannot translate. The opposite of homesick? "Awaysick"? You miss being away, very much? So that was their way of helping me getting over this. And it does help. (Respondent #26)

 "I'm generally very positive about CouchSurfing. And I've actually found that, well, like, it feels like you are taking a risk, it's usually really rewarding. Because in modern day society, I think people are... they don't trust others very much. And for instance, you see on the news all sorts of bad stories and I notice that many people are quite, yeah, pessimistic about others and about strangers and about other countries for instance. You see many political movements that are sort of, 'I don't know these people, they are evil' or something, you know. And I think it's very important that you try to, sort of, not be like that. So, it's very nice that you can meet all sorts of people and notice that they are, yeah, just people, and nice, you know, trustworthy, and so yeah, people shouldn't be so afraid actually. Because it is possible, something like this, and I think it works really well. That makes me really happy every time that you can like, maybe be at risk, but oh it works." (Respondent #24)

Exhibit 3-1 Motivations to couchsurf

"Good reasons" to trust in CouchSurfing

There are also plenty of "good reasons" to do CouchSurfing, in terms of good reasons to trust. This struck me on a sunny afternoon in Oxford when I was having a picnic with my CouchSurfing hosts and my friend James who was not a CouchSurfer. This was a situation where CouchSurfers outnumbered the non-CouchSurfers, with our five to his one. Instead of conversations that I was used to, in which non-CouchSurfers pepper the lone CouchSurfer with questions of safety and trust, the tables were turned – the CouchSurfers could not understand why James did not do it. Why would he spend money on hostels where he could stay for free with kind people? How could he think that CouchSurfing was risky, when he could check the references of people who were coming, and the number of known bad incidents was so small anyway? "It only takes one bad incident, and you're done for," protested James. The rest did not agree, and argued that the cost benefit analysis still favoured CouchSurfing, as the likelihood of good experiences happening far outweighed the risks. And anyway, what was the worst that could happen? All James's horror stories of "what if's" were rejected as far-fetched.

Indeed, from responses gathered in the field, there are many reasons to trust. Some of them are recorded as follows:

> "I don't have anything to lose. I don't take anything valuable, very much valuable, with me. Same as hosting. I don't, we don't live in those days where you kept money in the house, or you would be afraid of something. I mean, if someone, yeah you might be a prey that whatever happens and that even an accident. But yeah, I'm a student, so… why would they bother me with anything?" (Respondent #36)

> "I think as close as you can get to having a fundamental human nature, people are fundamentally trustworthy. Most of the time. Otherwise, *nothing* would really work. Like a lot of – erm, social institutions, social interactions, are just based on trust. Most things just wouldn't work, like um, money, is a social creation. Money wouldn't work without trust. Like, it's always abused in some cases but that would always happen whenever, like, you create a social system, or any system like a biological system, there'll be small amounts of parasitism on it, to try and take advantage of it. But if there is too much, the social system will collapse and not work anymore, so you always expect there to be some [something] for it to work at all, and there has to be some amount of trust." (Respondent #17)

"People who do CouchSurfing have a level of education. You have to be in a social class that makes it possible for you to do CouchSurfing in the first place, to travel and to offer a couch, a space in your house. You have to know about CouchSurfing which you only do if you know certain people, who've done it before or who travel themselves, you have to have access to the internet, you have to… also like, be attracted to the ideology, of sharing, and trusting people." (Respondent #30)

As noted in the theoretical framework by Möllering, there are elements of reason, routine and reflexivity in trust. These are reflected in the responses on why CouchSurfers thought that CouchSurfing was a good idea and that it was relatively secure. While worst case scenarios include being thrown out into the streets, being kidnapped, raped and/or murdered, respondents were quick to assure me that they did not think that the worst case scenarios would actually happen. Very commonly, they would assert that a careful read of the profile of the potential interaction partner would suffice to ensure a safe and enjoyable CouchSurfing experience.

Bialski and Batorski (2010) suggest that CouchSurfers do not view their activities as being high-risk, but rather that they perceive risks differently from the regular public (who view CouchSurfing as a high-risk activity that would endanger personal safety). They argue that CouchSurfers are a self-selected community that tends to trust more, but the question of how interpersonal trust is built is still relevant because CouchSurfers still make choices on whom to place their trust on. However, it is a sweeping generalization to say that CouchSurfers trust more, because this statement does not clarify the context. What is this trust in relation to? Does this trust apply across the board, to other contexts? The claim is too simplistic, and does not take into account the multiple other contexts that exist. Respondents clarify that their trust is contextual – for instance, trust involved in offering a couch extends to just that, and not to other aspects such as lending money to CouchSurfers. As put by Respondent #20,

"It really depends on what the trust is for. Would I trust them not to kill me? Yes, I trust them. Do I trust them if I leave them alone in my apartment, that nobody will be tempted to take something they shouldn't? I don't know. That requires a different trust. […] Would you trust someone with your money? Would you trust somebody with your… girlfriend, or your sister? It's a different kind of trust."

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It is true though that CouchSurfers see more good reasons to trust in CouchSurfing activities. The adoption of CouchSurfing is a leap of faith in itself, as with the adoption of any other technology or idea. For instance, a person who buys something online would have cleared the hurdle to trust e-commerce in general – however, she still needs to make trusting decisions on what vendors to buy from. After a new user makes the leap of faith to adopt CouchSurfing, the trust-building processes build upon that and it is then a question of choosing interaction partners who look trustworthy within an entire list of potential candidates.

Conclusion

Within this chapter, I first explained the usage of CouchSurfing and related concerns about trust, and then continued on to look at the theoretical framework of trust by Guido Möllering. There are three parts to his trust model proposed in 2001 - interpretation, suspension, and expectation. One forms interpretations of the situation, suspends what she does not know to make a leap of faith into the expected outcome. A later framework in 2006 refines this framework into a Trust Wheel whereby reason, routine and reflexivity are the bases (or good reasons) to form interpretations of trust. There are three main ways of how people deal with irreducible uncertainty: they form narratives to fill in the blanks, or bracket out the unknown and live with the missing information, or simply have the will to trust. For trust-building on e2f-SNSs, I focus on the first: on how people use the platform to form narratives of trustworthiness to facilitate the leap of faith from online to offline.

The study of trust-building is complex, compounded by the idiosyncrasies of the individual actors, as shown in the second half of the chapter. Interpretations of the system vary, as do expectations of the interactions, and all these impact upon the trust-building process. For these, I describe the motivations of CouchSurfers to do CouchSurfing (hence the expectations that they have out of the interactions) and some general risk perceptions that they have regarding hosting and surfing through CouchSurfing.org. I argue that, although CouchSurfers seem to have made a leap of faith just to adopt the idea of hospitality exchange, trust-building still happens in the selection of potential interaction partners.

In our case, we are looking at one trustor and two trustees. The CouchSurfer acts both as a trustor and a trustee, because the interactions are based on mutual trust of both host and surfer. The other trustee in question is the organization behind

CouchSurfing. In the next two chapters (4 and 5), I will focus on CouchSurfers as the trustors and trustees, but the role of the organization as a trustee is also important, as will be discussed in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 4 – SHAPING THE NARRATIVES OF TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trust-building on e2f-SNSs is about the effective building of narratives to facilitate trust. Essentially, the function of these narratives is to aid in dealing with irreducible vulnerability and uncertainty. In this chapter, I will look at the factors that form storylines of the narratives of trustworthiness, both from a community level and an individual level. Narratives of trustworthiness string together information to create stories about the potential interaction. If the narratives suggest a favourable outcome, the trustor is may be more easily convinced to act as though the outcome will be positive and trust the trustee. Extending the theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter, to answer the question of "how trust is built", I am examining specifically "how narratives of trustworthiness are built". The content of the narratives is of special focus here. In the next chapter, I look at the strategies through which the narratives are conveyed and received.

As I agree with the philosophy of Möllering of an interpretative approach in studying trust, the goal is not to describe specific storylines of the narratives of trustworthiness. Nor do I think it will be fruitful or indicative. As I will demonstrate, a number of prominent factors form the narrative content, forming a multitude of complex possibilities of how the narrative will turn out. From the community level, there is the metanarrative; and from the individual level, there is the trustor's perception of risk and expected outcomes. All these shape the content and structure of the narratives created. If we look at these factors, we will have a good idea of the logic behind the narratives, despite the apparent idiosyncrasies in the storylines. The trustor creates the narratives, with the help of information given by the trustees. To be clear, we are looking at both the roles of host and surfer. The host is both a trustor and the trustee, as she needs to trust the person who is coming to surf, and she also needs to appear trustworthy to be chosen as a host. The same goes for the role of the surfer, being both the trustor and the trustee. Therefore, in terms of user-to-user trust, when we speak about trustors and trustees, we are referring to the CouchSurfer (both roles of host and surfer) in general. The organization is the other trustee, but this will be addressed in Chapter 6.

The narratives formed are usually about the potential face-to-face interaction. This hinges very much on judging the person who is on the other end of the interaction, and further on about the match between the trustor and the trustee in an offline setting. Two main texts form the narratives: "About me" and "Why I would like to meet you". This is apparent in the guided Couch Request Form, where surfers are guided to fill in two fields – "Introduce yourself and explain a bit about your trip" and "Tell your host why you'd like to meet them". (See Figure 4.1) For the host, this is the information that will form the first impression of the potential surfer. For the surfer, when she browses the profile of the potential host, she also creates similar narratives about how the host is like, and what the host hopes to get out of this interaction.[14]
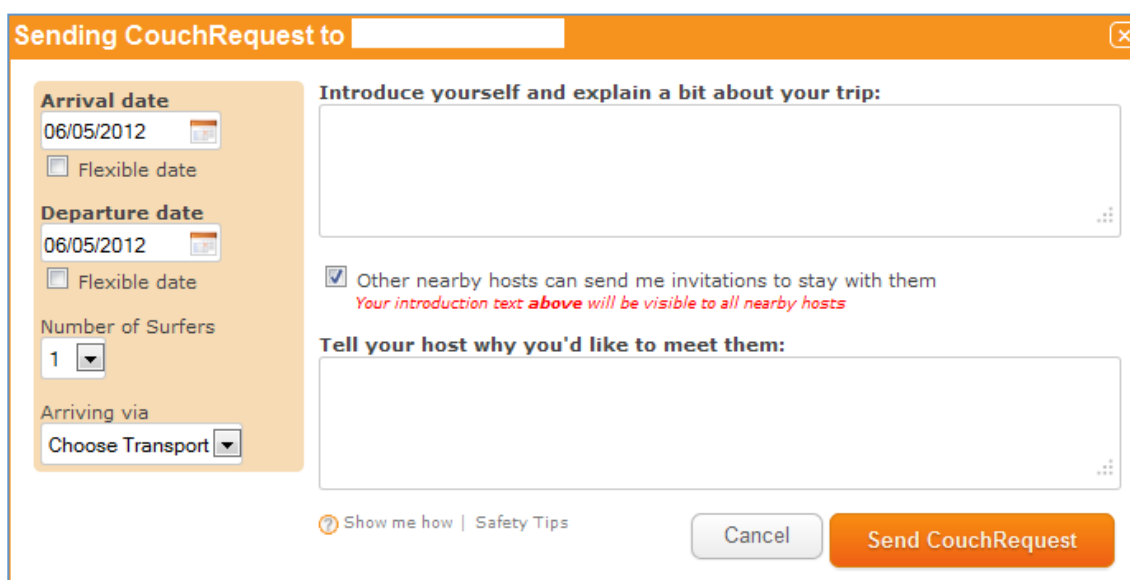
Figure 4-1 Couch Request Screenshot (Name censored)

According to the respondents, it is important that the narrative should make logical sense and not contain contradictory statements, about the potential guest and about his/her motives. A couple (Respondent #34 and #35) whom I interviewed said the following, when asked about how they were able to trust Couchsurfers who they were going to host:

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[14]In the old Couch Request Form (before 2012), there was only one field in which the surfers would have to figure out what to write – but the newest version has made it easier, and added a function whereby this request can be broadcast to nearby hosts who may be interested to invite the surfer as well.

Wife: "It's the background, isn't it, and how you feel about their reason for doing what they're doing. The Portuguese [CouchSurfers] were here for a course, and we know that this course is a local thing that is only done in a couple of places in the world. So we know about that. Our first CouchSurfer, she came for an interview, and we knew the organization, we knew they were interviewing, so that all fits together, and..."

Husband: "I suppose it's a bit like, what we were talking about, asking questions as a customs officer. You're trying to establish whether somebody's story holds together, if it all looks right and feels right."

Wife: "What other people have said about them, and if you can trust them."

This particular couple had also in one instance hosted some travelers who were stranded because of a car breakdown, near their house. Building a narrative of trustworthiness happened as well, as the couple explained their reasons for hosting the strangers. The travelers' story "hung together", because they seemed to be in a dire situation, and if it had been a staged robbery it didn't seem to be "very well-thought out". The scheme would involve waiting outside in the cold at 11pm, relying on hopes of being picked up by kind-hearted people whom they would then rob. Having constructed a narrative that logically ruled out criminal acts, they offered shelter to the strangers. The contrast between hosting CouchSurfers and random travelers is mainly the availability of information to make that narrative, and to reduce uncertainty. As described by the wife of the couple,

"But the difference with CouchSurfing is that we've got some information. And also the people that are couchsurfing, it's like a bit of a community in a way. They know what they're asking for, and you know what you're offering. Whereas people at the top of the road[referring to the stranded travelers], we didn't know what they expected, they didn't know what we expected, they didn't know anything about us, anything at all. So that was purely just based on trust."

The statement "purely just based on trust" implies that hosting the stranded travelers required more trust than hosting CouchSurfers. I read it to mean that the leap of faith is harder to make when one cannot read the guest's profile first. The availability of information makes a difference in the trust-building process. It is easier for them to make the leap of faith when equipped with information about 1) the background of the surfer and 2) her expectations of the interaction – while the alternative of hosting random strangers requires much more guesswork.

The reason why CouchSurfing is so successful in building connections is that it is able to extract information along the lines of these two aspects in an effective way. Consider the information fields available in one's profile, as shown in Table 4.1. That provides a wealth of information to construct her life story and world view, her reputation within the system, her expectations of the CouchSurfing activity, etc. This goes for the trustee, who paints a picture of herself within these frames; and it also goes for the trustor, who tries to look at the persona from the profile and gauge the trustworthiness of the trustee. Information that comes from different sources also provides the opportunity for triangulation, in checks and balances of the truth of one's statements. For instance, one can read the general information (provided by oneself) and check if the references (provided by others) say anything contradictory.

General information	Extended descriptive information	Trust mechanisms
- Age - Birthday - Gender - Occupation - Education - Grew up in … - Website URL - Languages spoken - Groups belonged to - Couch availability - Photos - Locations travelled	- Personal description - How I participate in CS - CouchSurfing Experience - Interests - Philosophy - Music, movies, books (that I like) - Types of people I enjoy - Teach, learn, share - One amazing thing I've seen or done - Opinion on the Couchsurfing.org project - Couch Information	- Verification - Vouches - Friend links - References - Roles within the system (CS Team Member [volunteer], ambassador, past participant of collective, etc)
		Other system-generated information
		- Percentage of Couchsurf requests replied to - Last login date and time - Last login location - Number of profile views - Member since…

Table 4-1 Types of information on a Couchsurfing Profile.

The quote from Respondent #34 also illuminates certain factors that drive the content of the narratives. "They know what they're asking for, you know what you're offering." When expectations are clear, the level of uncertainty is lower. The information gleaned from the CouchSurfing website is able to fill in the blanks based on community and individual aspects. I have found that at the community level, there exists a metanarrative of CouchSurfers being a community of reflexive cosmopolites with certain traits, values and beliefs, which aids in forming a narrative of trustworthiness. The metanarrative not only helps the building of the narrative, but also provides a guide of the social norms and taboos, which are important to build trust at the macro level. At the micro level of the individual, it depends on one's perception towards risk and efficacy of handling uncertainty, as well as expected outcomes of the interaction. The next few sections will explain these in further detail.

The Metanarrative

Through talking to my respondents and immersing myself in the field, a recurring theme surfaced. People would talk about the "CouchSurfing Spirit", and explain to me in their words what CouchSurfing was about to them, and why they could place trust in the community. The term "open-minded" for example, cropped up in many interviews in terms of being an important characteristic of the CouchSurfer's own identity, a welcomed trait in a potential host or surfer, and an underlying attribute of the self-selected community of CouchSurfers. Some CouchSurfers described reading profiles and looking for manifestations of open-mindedness, such as having travelled widely, hosted people of different nationalities and getting references about being open to other cultures. The trait of open-mindedness has become such a cliché that it even sparked a forum group, titled "Enemies of the sentence 'I am open-minded, easygoing, I like travels and meet new people'"[15], with 1107 members at the time of writing.

I set off to investigate this phenomenon, and come to the conclusion that there is an overarching metanarrative or grand narrative that underlies the narratives generated. A metanarrative is "a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (Stephens, 1998). Judgments based on

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[15]" ENEMIES OF THE SENTENCE " I AM OPENMINDED, EASYGOING, I LIKE TRAVELS AND MEET NEW PEOPLE" Group, http://www.couchsurfing.org/group.html?gid=15436, accessed on 17/8/12

user-to-user communication are bolstered with a metanarrative of the idealistic image of a cosmopolitan community that is authentic and reflexive, which paints the CouchSurfing community as a group of travelers who are of a certain ethos. This happens against a backdrop of globalization and a world that is shrinking due to higher mobility of its citizens. For this, the literature of cosmopolitanism (as discussed in the next section) can be drawn upon to understand the larger context in which Couchsurfing.org operates, and argue that a metanarrative is formed of a normative cosmopolitan way of life that shapes certain emotional and ethical commitments.

This metanarrative helps build trust through two main ways. Firstly, it helps the trustor in building the narratives of trustworthy and cosmopolitan encounters. Through imagining a community (à la Benedict Anderson) that is composed of like-minded cosmopolites of a certain ideological bent, a good foundation for solidarity and trust is laid. Secondly, it provides a social context to the members of the community. CouchSurfers are socialized into having a set of socially accepted values, attitudes and behaviour. The trustors base their judgments on the normative ideals, which also guide the trustees' presentation of self, propagating trust within the system.

What is cosmopolitanism?

There are multiple definitions of cosmopolitanism. One that is succinct and thought-provoking is that of Beck's (2003, p.17), where he defines cosmopolitanism as a condition in which the "otherness of the other is included in one's own self-identity and self-definition". In this globalized world that we live in, the local and the global are getting increasingly intertwined – the existence of hospitality exchange networks like CouchSurfing exemplifies the demand to connect as global citizens, beyond geographical boundaries. To break down the concept that is cosmopolitanism, Kendall, Woodward and Skrbis (2009) draw upon Swidler's work on cultural repertoire (2003) and sees cosmopolitanism as a "toolkit of habits, skills and styles from which people develop strategies of action". They suggest that different situations will induce different levels of the enactment of being cosmopolitan – cosmopolitanism is more than a disposition, it is a "*disposition performed*" (Kendall et al., 2009, p. 107, emphasis in original). Cosmopolitanism is therefore "a set of ideas, frame for interpretation, behavioural patterns, and knowledges that allow an individual to perform a cosmopolitan subjectivity" (ibid, p.108), based on broad tenets of mobilities, cultural-symbolic competencies, inclusivity and openness. This premise

that cosmopolitanism is performed is pertinent further on as we continue to discuss the matter theoretically, in terms of subcultural capital and presentation of self.

Kendall et al. (2009) suggest that there are two forms of cosmopolitanism, one that is banal and unreflexive that is based mostly on uncritical consumption of The Other; and another that is authentic and reflexive, where the cosmopolite is genuinely interested and open about other cultures. The consumption of food, tourism, media, and other products that result from a globalized situation in the *unreflexive* cosmopolite may result in cultural openness in intellectual and aesthetic domains; however the *reflexive* cosmopolite has deeper emotional and ethical commitments. According to Kendall et al. (ibid, p.22),

> "Emotional commitment is demonstrated by an empathy with and interest in other cultures, which fuses intellectual outlooks with dispositions centred on such things as pleasurable personal experiences or exposure to media that predispose one to react positively to the idea of contact with other cultures. Closely related to this is a recognition that much openness to other cultures and places derives from a strong ethical commitment to universalist values and ideas that are expected to reach beyond the local (Bauböck 2002:112). Cosmopolitanism, in other words, entails a distinct ethical orientation towards selflessness, worldliness, and communitarianism."

At this juncture we pause to consider Germann Molz's critiques on "cosmopolitans on the couch" (2007), as she argues that CouchSurfing itself (or rather, hospitality exchange networks in general, but I shall focus on Couchsurfing.org in this discussion) is not an inclusive community by default. A paradox is presented: hospitality exchange networks that fundamentally reflect and advocate a cosmopolitan openness to difference actually delineate the "right" kind of difference from the "wrong". The former assumes that participants are middle class and above, and have the means to travel and the ability to reciprocate in kind, with broader commonalities of common interests in travelling and learning about other cultures. The latter, however, includes those who are in danger of turning from a "guest" to a "parasite", and whose difference "threatens rather than serves the cosmopolitan fantasy" (ibid, p.77). The community is governed by reputation systems and other mechanisms that create the social structure, internalizing this philosophy within the community.

Germann Molz argues that the community of CouchSurfing is conditionally open to citizens of the world based on certain value judgments. However, the judgments may run deeper than fears of attracting abusers of free hospitality – it

hinges very much on the type of cosmopolitan attitude is important for CouchSurfers. Linking back to previous discussions of reflexive vs. unreflexive cosmopolitanism, my data show that normative ideals of the CouchSurfing community push for *reflexive cosmopolitanism*, a way of life that celebrates diversity and different cultures. For many, this is an ideological notion that is deeply emotional and connected to their sense of identity. This can be linked to the observation of a lamentation often heard amongst Couchsurfers, that they are not "typical" of members of their society – narrow-minded, conservative people who often hold prejudices against people that are different.

> "I think it's for me, one of the most important points to be open-minded, and to communicate with open-minded people, because I see a lot of racism, prejudice. I meet a lot of people, especially in my village, they are not at all open-minded and they are racist. And this is one of the worst things for me. To be tolerant is really important, I want to educate my son like this, and also, this is a point for me that my son, through CS, has the chance to make experiences with open-minded people. And not to ask for colour of your skin, your income, your parents have a big car, or whatever." (Respondent #25, single mother to a 16-year-old)

Another quote exemplifies the point the reflexive cosmopolitanism is perceived of CouchSurfers:

> "I think there is this ethos and creed. A lot of people who do CouchSurfing are very ethical. It is not specifically stated, but a lot of people feel that this is a system that makes the world a better place. […] I feel that people are not looking at the destructive. They just want to make an impact. They just want to meet people, let them know about their culture, be an ambassador, network, I mean, just get to learn about the global village that the world is becoming now. I have never sat down with a Taiwanese and talked about world politics. I mean, that was a profound experience that would have never happened if I didn't surf." (Respondent #2)

Social Taboos on Couchsurfing

An examination of social taboos on CouchSurfing can illustrate the existence of a metanarrative of a reflexive, cosmopolitan community. Through looking at what CouchSurfing is not, we can get an idea of what CouchSurfing is, or at least, what it should be, according to the mainstream narrative. Attitudes and behaviours that are not appreciated within the CouchSurfing community demonstrate the underlying values and moral judgments commonly held by Couchsurfers. Through talking to

Couchsurfers in interviews or during informal interactions, I was able to observe that certain behaviours or attitudes are frowned upon by majority of the members within CS. The strongest taboo is arguably racism or other forms of prejudice, as this is the epitome of narrow-mindedness, and "not what Couchsurfing is about".

> "If I ever hosted somebody who would go on about – against stuff that I'm very much for, like against people of a certain skin colour, or against gays, or against people of a certain religion, I would certainly leave a negative reference, stating that, you know, 'it's Couchsurfing, you should be open to everybody.'" (Respondent #26)

This taboo against racism was present while interviewing respondents, as the interviews happened within the setting of Couchsurfing. From time to time there would be remarks that could be construed as racism, and respondents are quick to check themselves, or preface their statements with apologetic phrases like "I don't like generalizing, but..." or "This might be racist, but...". For instance, the following quote from a European CouchSurfer shows a sudden change of direction in his words when he thought he might be making a racist remark, from saying "I don't know if I can trust opinions of Indonesian people" to saying something more neutral.

> "But well, I think it's good to see that somebody was there before and when I look for Jakarta for travel, I am checking if there is European people writing. I didn't know about Jakarta at all, and if there were only Indonesian people writing, I don't know like, if I can tru– well, it's just like, an imaginary thing. If it might be a plan to rob, or something. It will be really clever though, if you want to rob somebody, just invite him to your place and you can have his backpack and his camera and everything. I didn't know at all about Jakarta, Jakarta's a huge city, that's why I checked, and if there's this Italian dude saying, he's very nice or she's very nice, blablabla, then it's ok. Just one, it's enough." (Respondent #4)

From the point of view of some hosts, it is important that the surfer is more interested in the cultural exchange than the prospect of free accommodation. As explained by Respondent #25, "I prefer to hear the reason why you request my couch, is not because you have your own guest room, a big guest room with shower, but because you want to communicate with me. Or you like my area, you read my profile, and you think it could match." Money is a taboo as well, or specifically, using CouchSurfing for commercial gain. When the idea of a "CouchSurfing tip jar" (where the guest contributes some money to the host) is brought up in conversations, most CouchSurfers express disapproval. Another oft-heard quote is "CouchSurfing is not a

dating site", though sometimes it is expressed with a tinge of sarcasm. Using CouchSurfing as a platform to have romantic encounters belittles its mission of creating pure, intercultural relationships that rises beyond the banality of casual sex. In sum, it is not in the "CouchSurfing Spirit" to use the system with ulterior motives, and many CouchSurfers believe strongly that it should be used for higher ideals, such as making the world a better place, through a process of experiential learning about other cultures.

Subtle cues on profiles can serve as red flags. For instance, the "ethnicity" field has generated some controversy[16], and some of my respondents have stated that if someone fills in the ethnicity field with "White", it is a put-off and will damage the person's chance of being accepted as a guest.

> "As I said, if the person thinks that 'white' is an ethnicity that he needs to put forward, that tells me that either the person hasn't thought a whole lot, he's not a very intelligent person, or he's a racist. Because if you put that forward as your ethnicity, he thinks that, underlying I assume that the person thinks that being white is somehow superior to some other things." (Respondent #20)

Another commonly expressed example of a red flag is would be that of a male host stating his preference for hosting female surfers. "It's a really bad sign", said Respondent #18, a female Couchsurfer in her thirties. This can be construed as a safety issue for women, but that is beside the point, as a number of male Couchsurfers who also echo the same sentiments. On the flip side of the gender coin, a male respondent raised his concerns about older female Couchsurfers who may be surfing for sexual encounters as well.

> "You can see profiles of some elder women, 40, 45, 50, sometimes 60. Lots of masculine friends. Lots of hostings where you just wonder, what is she doing there? And you say to yourself, if she was married and if she had a guy in her life, would she have hosted this guy? You know it, you can't prove it. When you live long enough, and you're old enough, you just feel that there's something wrong. Obviously you tend to think, I mean, some profiles, very minority, very very small, but when you see a profile that she really really surfs a lot, either she likes travelling, when you scrutinize, you say, no. She doesn't like travelling. She just likes to meet new people, and especially new guys, and, and… and you tell yourself, I may be wrong, but there is one chance out of two, that this girl is only surfing for being fucked." (Respondent #19)

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[16] See the discussion at http://wiki.couchsurfing.org/en/Ethnicity

While the male respondent did not raise this as a safety issue, he did not approve of it as he perceived that the host or surfer is interested in hook-ups as a primary motivation in hosting, which is again, "not what Couchsurfing is about".

The Metanarrative of Reflexive Cosmopolitanism

CouchSurfing grew organically through the efforts of its founders and further on with a lot of active participation and volunteerism from its growing community. In the earlier days, the ideology of cultural exchange and sharing experiences was pushed via the mission statement of CouchSurfing published on the website,

> "As a community we strive to do our individual and collective parts to create world a better place, and we believe that the surfing of couches is a mean to accomplish this goal. CouchSurfing is not about the furniture, not just about finding free accommodations around the world; it's about making connections worldwide. We make the world a better place by opening our homes, our hearts, and our lives. We open our minds and welcome the knowledge that cultural exchange makes available. We create deep and meaningful connections that cross oceans, continents and cultures. CouchSurfing wants to change not only the way we travel, but how we relate to the world!"[17]

Volunteers were motivated by the ideology of cultural exchange and a global, inclusive village, expressed through the former tagline, "Participate in creating a better world, one couch at a time". At one time, volunteers were responsible for most operations of the organization, such as programming the website and other core functions. The result of this active volunteerism was the cultivation of a culture of reflexive cosmopolitanism, and this was embedded into the website in various manifestations – overtly through discussions in the forum groups and guides on CouchSurfing etiquette, and more subtly through the infrastructure of the website in data fields of the profile, for instance. A detailed historical account about CouchSurfing can be read in Chapter 6 (also with regards to how the organization eventually detached itself from the community), but for now it is sufficient to say that the metanarrative emerged out of the community's efforts in building the website and its social structure to reflect a culture of reflexive cosmopolitanism. In part, the nature of the activity (of hosting and surfing) also reinforces this metanarrative. By engaging in hospitality exchange, one "shows the attitude that you need for CouchSurfing" (Respondent #16).

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[17]Old CS Policy FAQ - https://docs.google.com/View?docid=dfgj4wck_17gswzgx, accessed online on 1/3/12

The metanarrative of CouchSurfing as a community of reflexive cosmopolites help to tell the story of individual CouchSurfers who are likely to be (or aspire to be) widely travelled, and know the rules of engagement within the CouchSurfing community and beyond. A romantic view can be constructed, of CouchSurfers having "the spirit of people who hitchhike the world" (Respondent #3, in an admiring manner), who have "a distinct ethical orientation towards selflessness, worldliness and communitarianism […], driving much of the contemporary environmental, anti-war and anti-globalization movements" (Kendall et al., 2009, p.22-23). It is entirely conceivable that one who upholds these ideals and sentiments would be someone who would not pose bodily harm to oneself, or be an unpleasant guest or host. The metanarrative builds a strong foundation for the content of the narratives (that enable trust) to be formed, and a person who decides to use the CouchSurfing website would already have reduced the gap needed to make the leap of faith to trust individual members.

The metanarrative establishes social norms within the community, influencing the behaviour of members through socialization. The social norms and the metanarrative are in a mutually reinforcing cycle. The metanarrative makes it clear that certain behaviours are "in the spirit of CouchSurfing", and certain behaviours are not. Having a normative framework as a moral compass (for right and wrong behaviours within the system) reduces uncertainty in the interactions among members of the community. One knows what is appropriate and what is not, and makes the assumption that other members of the community understand that too, as demonstrated in the section of social taboos of CouchSurfing. The possibility of sanctioning misbehaving members (through leaving negative references) also provides the confidence in the community in general. These make it easier for narratives of trustworthiness (or untrustworthiness, for that matter) to be formed.

While the value judgments and informal rules attempt to construct a cosmopolitan world where people are culturally competent, who are genuinely receptive to foreign cultures without ulterior motives, and shun common prejudices and bigotry – it is also apparent that things are not as ideal in practice. Discussions on the forums sometimes relay horror stories of freeloaders refusing to leave, or leeching excessively on the resources of the host. There are traces of racism in interactions with other CouchSurfers, and more so on forum discussions; also, it is not unusual to hear of sexual encounters between hosts and guests. It is beside the point to argue whether

CouchSurfers act within the norms of the community or not. The point is, as a member of the community, it is important to present oneself as someone who understands the rules, to help in telling the story of a trustworthy CouchSurfer.

CouchSurfing as a Community or a Service?

Although one is tempted to make a blanket statement that the metanarrative forms the narratives of trustworthiness and provides a definite guide of whether or not one trusts, based on the trustee's level of reflexive cosmopolitanism, the case is not as simple. It is apparent that, although people who surf couches with the sole motivation of budget travel are scorned in many segments of the CouchSurfing community, there are critics who see such judgmental views as hypocrisy. In a widely circulated blog post on critiques on CouchSurfing [18], the anonymous author wrote that free accommodation is the primary goal of CouchSurfing, and that cultural exchange is a positive, but not necessary, consequence. He/she argued that hosts and surfers (especially surfers) are compelled to spend time together in the name of cultural exchange, even when they do not enjoy it:

> "One of the most disconcerting things about CouchSurfing is the pressure to hang out with people when you would not otherwise want to do so. Not in a positive way as in talking to people you would not normally talk to and gaining new insight, but rather a pressure for people who simply don't get along to pretend they like and are interested in learning more about each other. Every user is encouraged to fill in their profile with as much detail as possible not unlike a MySpace page. The majority of these details have absolutely no relevance to requesting to stay on someone's couch for a few days either from a hosting or surfing perspective. This is actually enforced in some ways with quite a few people stating that they will not even consider hosting you unless your profile is substantially filled out. Didn't list your favourite movies and books? Then forget it. It is this need and want to know everything about people that strikes me as being so very hypocritical and fake. If you want to get to know someone then talk to them when they arrive; don't use their lists of favourite movies and books or philosophies and political opinions as the only indicator."

This quote reinforces the idea of the metanarrative that exists in the CouchSurfing community, which directly affects how people behave and fill in their profiles. According to this writer, it appears that the metanarrative that exists on

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[18]"A Criticism of CouchSurfing and a Review of the Alternatives" http://allthatiswrong.wordpress.com/2010/01/24/a-criticism-of-couchsurfing-and-review-of-alternatives/#free accessed online on 26/6/12

CouchSurfing.org does not apply to other similar hospitality exchange websites. He/
She continued,

> "The level of emphasis that these different [hospex] sites place on free accommodation is perhaps where they differ most. For CouchSurfing while free accommodation exists as a point, it is not at all defined by it and it may well be a minor point. There are a great many people on CouchSurfing who are using the service to save money even if they don't say so. For GlobalFreeloaders the emphasis is without a doubt on free accommodation. This is evident in the lack of profiles and general philosophy of the people on the site. Instead of checking out individual profiles, you mass mail the people in any city you think may like to host you, and anyone interested gets back to you. Personally, I find this to be a whole lot more honest and refreshing than the somewhat forced "let's be friends!" philosophy pushed by CouchSurfing. For Hospitality Club the emphasis seems about equal to that of seeing new cultures. I have not had a chance to use BeWelcome or Tripping however at a glance they seem to have a similar philosophie [sic] to Hospitality Club."

Contrast this critique with the opinion of Respondent #19:

> "There are two 'Couchsurfing Spirits'. Officially, there are 3 million members. Practically, there are probably only one million members that are active. But, one million means that there are a lot of people who are on CS who don't share the initial spirit. The initial spirit, which is the spirit of people who either hitchhike the world, who likes travelling, who likes the act of travelling, and meeting new people. In the original spirit, there is also the idea of not just travelling the world, but sharing, experiencing, with personality, meeting very different people, or people who will enrich your experience of the human race. It's a human experience. That's the first spirit. The second spirit is more recent, and, it's because of the success of the network. It's the spirit of [pause] a free place to stay. It's simple. It's free, and it's relatively cool. By that I mean this second spirit includes the idea that it's not only free, but it's also a cool network, a sympathetic [nice] network where people are relatively nice."

Although Respondent #19 acknowledged the "second spirit" of free accommodation, he obviously revered the first. He pointed out that not everybody has the same interpretation of what CouchSurfing is, and went on to say,

> "But I think that if the network is nice, for this second generation of couchsurfers, it's also because there was there was the first spirit. If the first spirit hadn't been there, I don't think the success would have happened. […] Well, roughly I would say that people who are over 35 even over 30, are rather in the first spirit, even if they're newcomers. Erm, of course, old-time Couchsurfers are in the first spirit. And, I would say that people under 30, and especially people who come in the last year, last 12 months, a lot of them are mostly interested because of the free hosting. Which doesn't mean that they won't change their spirit. They may change their spirit. They may be attracted at first that it's free, and then say, oh it's not only free, it's better than free. So it

changes, you may have different people having different spirits, but roughly it's that. Two spirits, hospitality, human adventure, sharing and second spirit, free, cool, that's it."

The data reflects the existence of a dominant discourse (and therefore, counter discourses) of reflexive cosmopolitanism as normative behaviour within the system. This is due to two fundamentally different ways of viewing CouchSurfing.org – as a community, or as a service. It is noted in Heesakkers's work (2008), that some users had reservation over the rapid growth of Couchsurfing.org, indicating that there might be a danger where quantity surpasses quality. What used to be a "community" would become more of a "service". The distinction is important because the sense of responsibility and ownership would affect how the website is used, e.g. a person who perceived himself/ herself to be part of the community would be more inclined to protect its safety and common ideologies. The concern of these users has been confirmed by another study through an inherent value testing of Couchsurfing.org. (Lauterbach et al., 2008), comparing the experiences of new and experienced users of the website. One of the major findings was that existing and loyal users prized friendship and community, whereas new users viewed the site as more of a service.

People who hold these different assumptions tend to use and interpret the website differently. Exhibit 4.1, a post taken from my personal journal, describes a first-hand experience of the dissonance felt when CouchSurfers operate on different interpretations. As a host who believes in extending hospitality to travelers and cultural exchange, it was jarring to me when I was stood up by a guest, who later bought me dinner and told me that CouchSurfing was only about free things.

Dinner with Mike*
*Name has been changed

"Think about it," he said. "Couchsurfing is about the free stuff. That's what it is."

There I was, sitting across this man who had stood me up the day before. I had waited for him at the MRT station for an hour, with full conviction that he would come "because no one would stand up their host". Upon reaching home, I was furious to note that he had sent me a message at 8:20pm, a full hour and 20 minutes after our supposed meeting, casually mentioning a change of plans. After bouncing messages to and fro, with me being as cold and curt as I could, and him being profusely apologetic, it was decided that he would buy me dinner the following day.

I was just beginning to loosen up, when he started talking about his surfing strategy.

"I usually ask a few people. I say yes to everyone, so that I won't be stuck somewhere without a host."

I widened my eyes in incredulity although he did not seem to notice. If he did, it did not break his stride.

"It's like a form of insurance for me. I realize this might be better for the surfer than the host, but everyone does it anyway. The last time I surfed at Beijing, the host didn't turn up. I ended up staying at a hotel. You see, Couchsurfing does not have personnel to check each and every host, about the place that you're staying in, and the host of the place. It's because it's free. So you have to take the risk. There are many issues involved, like maybe the cleanliness of the place, the personality of the host, and etc. I like to have the feeling that if I don't like this place, I will have another to fall back on."

At this point I was feeling the heat in my face. I felt quite used and betrayed really, that I had actually waited for an hour for this person who evidently just thought of me as one of his backups. Also this brought a flashback to a story that a friend once told me - she had two friends who had a line of hosts booked, just so that they could inspect each and every place before they decided to stay in one. I had dismissed it as an isolated case of misfits. Now this guy before me was basically saying that everyone did the same thing.

"But what about the spirit of Couchsurfing? Don't you think that this is a selfish and disrespectful thing to do to the host that's opening her home to you?"

This was when he uttered the words that Couchsurfing was about the free stuff. The fact that I almost hosted this guy, if he did show up in the first place, added to the sting. I could feel my body stiffen as I leant forward, to a position optimized for pouncing   and   biting   someone's   head   off.

"Think about it. It started off with this guy who spammed student emails in Iceland because he needed a free place to stay. That's the spirit of Couchsurfing. A free place to stay." He continued, oblivious of the precarious state his head was in. "There's no obligation for cultural exchange. Your guest is not obligated to talk to you, or share his or her culture. Anyway, if I needed to know about culture in Malaysia, I could always watch videos on youtube or wikipedia it. My point is, it's not about cultural exchange, it's about saving money. That's Couchsurfing for you."

"You're just trying to justify your actions," I accused.

"No I'm not. I'm just telling you the facts. I am not obligated to buy you dinner. Of course, I really want to apologize for what I did yesterday, for you waiting for an hour, but I don't see anything wrong in me looking for a few hosts. I just wanted to be sure that   I   won't   be   stranded   again."

"If you were so afraid of being stranded, you could always book yourself into a hotel, just pay for the security."

"But I have already budgeted my trip to cost this much. That's why I'm doing Couchsurfing." We continued the verbal sparring for a bit, but the situation was quite clear cut. We were operating on different assumptions and interpretations of the system, and neither one of us was wrong. He pointed out that I was too idealistic, and implied that I was naive, even, to think of Couchsurfing of having higher ideals than being a cheap way to travel. I argued that he was unethical, selfish and an inconsiderate guest.

"We must look like we're in the middle of a breakup," he said, to lighten the tense atmosphere.

"Yes, because of irreconcilable differences," I retorted.

In retrospect, I feel that the heated argument that we had was a very interesting addition to my data. I had not realized how deeply entrenched I was in the ideals of what I was doing, that I assumed that everyone else held the same ethics and world views. There was nothing wrong with his conception of CS, just different, from his profile it was evident that he was hosting too, so he was not only leeching off the system.

With different interpretations of the website, there came different expectations. He thought of it as material exchange whereas I thought of it as cultural exchange. He saw it as a service and I saw it as a community. For a moment there we couldn't communicate our different sets of reality, until I calmed down and opened up to his views. And once I did, it made sense and did not warrant the disbelief that I had experienced. But then the confidence in my reality crumbled, and discomfort ensued, perhaps because this other interpretation was "uglier" than what I had in mind, of people genuinely wanting to contribute to the gift economy to make a difference in the world. For higher ideals such as learning about themselves, other cultures, and the world in general, which are quite sacred to me personally.

After dinner he invited himself to my home. He proved to be interesting conversation, and apart from our initial differences we actually got along pretty well. An inspection of my home yielded approving remarks, and he announced that he would come and stay the next time that he was in Singapore.

I smiled and did not respond.

As a brief afterword: I checked the profile of Mike after some time, and noticed that a host had left him a negative reference. The reference held a link to a forum post which provided an elaborate account of the host's grievances. Mike had apparently used the host's telephone to make expensive overseas calls, used the host's toiletries, and tampered the host's personal mail, among other offenses. Mike proceeded to delete his profile and build a new one, sending me a new friend request, which I ignored.

Exhibit 4-1 Journal entry – Dinner with Mike

Here we see a CouchSurfer who did not care about the metanarrative of reflexive cosmopolitanism, and completely negated its existence. Two interesting

observations can be pointed out from this case. Firstly, the resulting interaction can be very disconcerting, between one who holds on to the set of beliefs and values reflected by the metanarrative and another who doesn't. I have since realized that it is more about a good match between two people with similar expectations of CouchSurfing. Seasoned Couchsurfers consciously look for people who match with them in this sense, to avoid unpleasant encounters. Secondly, the metanarrative, as it is propagated and reinforced by the community, tends to affect one's trust-building more when the trustor views CouchSurfing as a community. Conversely, when one sees CouchSurfing as a service, the metanarrative does not matter as much. In this case, the latter's narratives of trustworthiness would centre around risk perception as discussed in the next section.

Trust – In Relation to What?

In the previous chapter, we discussed the "good reasons" to trust, alluding to the risk perception of Couchsurfers of the activity. As it turns out, the perception of risk affects the narrative built as well. Different Couchsurfers have different concerns, and the level of danger that they perceive directly affects the intricacy of the narrative. But before going into that, I will discuss the concept of risk, and how it is perceived and handled.

> "Risk is a feature of all human action which has effects that are more or less uncertain and yield some kinds of benefits or costs. So, perception of risk involves implicit or explicit judgments of the likelihood or uncertainty, and the desirability or undesirability, of such effects." (Eiser, 2004, p.2)

Taking risks does not imply that there is trust within the action (for instance, one may take the risk because there are no better options); however trusting decisions are made in the light of risks. One has expectations of positive outcomes in dealing with situations of uncertainty when one trusts. There are interesting perspectives on risk perception from the point of view of cognitive learning, as summarized by Taylor-Gooby and Zinn (2006). Firstly, there are explanations on how people develop mental strategies to make their judgments, leading to distorted risk perceptions. Examples would be that people tend to overestimate uncommon but salient risks, or perceive risks to be more serious when the consequences happen immediately, or perceive risks based on the level of losses, as opposed to gains. Secondly, perspectives such as Social Learning Theory show how perceptions of risk are accumulated experientially through

acquiring feedback from the social environment. Thirdly, some scholars argue that people relate concepts and rules, developing certain representations of issues in their minds. These mental models are used to understand risks and construct explanations. These three cognitive learning perspectives aid in the interpretation of situations where one takes or avoids risk, or chooses to trust or not to. Lastly, some scholars have also argued that it is not enough to look at cognitive learning perspectives, as emotional and affective factors are also significant, especially when it involves time pressure or uncertainty (ibid).

Taking an interpretative approach to understanding the perception of risks, Tulloch and Lupton interviewed 134 people from Australia and Britain to understand how laypeople view risk. They concluded that most respondents view risk "as negative, frightening, involving taking a step into the unknown but also a degree of rational judgment and choice on the part of the individual concerning whether not to take this step. Once this choice has been made, however, there is a sense of fatalism about what may then happen, a loss of control over the outcomes" (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003, p.37). This description of taking the risky step towards the unknown resembles the leap of faith, or "suspension" as coined by Möllering (2006), the very essence of trust that requires the actors to deal with irreducible uncertainty and vulnerability.

There are some general lessons to be learnt from Tulloch and Lupton's findings. Firstly, the definitions of risk of the regular person are shaped by demographic factors such as gender, age, sexual identity, occupation etc. What is very risky for one may not be as risky for another, such as the example given on the risk of contracting AIDS – it is expressed more strongly as a risk by homosexual respondents than heterosexual ones. Female respondents are also more concerned about violence and crimes against personal safety as opposed to the male respondents. Secondly, perception of risk is dynamic and changes in time. With age, one may become risk-averse in terms of doing adventure sports (because they are "older and wiser", as explained by a respondent (ibid, p.20) or inversely, less cautious as one feels fewer familial responsibilities. The point is that the same act may invoke different risk perceptions at different points of time by the same individual. In general, it is important to keep in mind that risk is dynamic, contextual and historical.

The interviews indicate that perception of risk influences the narratives built. The higher the risk level perceived, the more information is needed to form the narratives. The same person, in different circumstances, will build narratives

differently. Such is the case of the following Couchsurfer, when pointing out different information needs for surfing and hosting:

> "If I couchsurf at someone's place, I want references. But I will host other Couchsurfers without references. Because being at home, it's still safe with my parents. While travelling alone, I am very dependent on this person. So it requires more trust to couchsurf than to host. When I couchsurf, I look a lot (laughs), I look whether they're certified, if they're vouched for, I look at that, while I do not look at that when I'm hosting." (Respondent #26)

As with risk perception in general, the factors affecting the level of danger perceived are plentiful. From a newbie who has no clue to a seasoned Couchsurfer who has done it several times, one's experience level decreases the uncertainty level. A single mother has more to lose (a child to protect, for instance) than a shared flat of college students, and therefore requires more references from a potential guest:

> "Like, my friend has two daughters, I think it's easier in this case to take only, or to accept, only females. Because if she leaves her house, her youngest daughter is 13, mmm…. You need a high trust degree to leave your guest with your daughter, for example. Especially with children, you need high trust. Because you are responsible for your children, and if I am the CSer, I have to be, erm… I have to take the responsibility for my children. And if I decide to accept the CSer, it has to be 100% safe for my children. Especially if they are small. Because you can fake references, and I would not take a male host with small children in my house, without more than let's say, 5 positive references, or even more. Because I'm responsible for my children. I think it's important because if something goes wrong you have to live with it. And rape is everywhere, especially with children. So I think this is an important point you have to be careful, also with CS you have to be careful." (Respondent #25)

The more confidence and control one has over the situation, the less one needs an elaborate narrative. This is illustrated quite well in the following quote:

> "It's like, well, you know, I was thinking why do you trust? For a thing like this? I asked myself. I just came to this that it's not up to anything in the profile. It's up to how I trust myself, and you know, that's the point. If I know like, I have my backpack here, I'm 80kilos, I'm a sportsman, I know who I am, I know how to talk, I know this and that, and I know how to find my way, it's like I'm really confident about my personality, what I can do and what I can't do. I know myself pretty well, *then* I'll be able to trust. But if I don't feel confident, if I don't know who I am, I don't know like, where to go, I'm lost with my personality, then I will not be able to trust. So it's really up to my personality. More than to a picture or anything, in a profile. So I would trust you and I would trust a person who has a picture with tattoos with a mad face or something. No difference." (Respondent #4)

Occasionally I would come across interesting interpretations of potential risks. There was a single man who was reluctant to host single ladies, for the fear of being framed of sexual harassment. In a situation of his words pitted against hers, he believed that he was in a disadvantage, and therefore he preferred to host males or couples instead. The point is, although there are common conceptions, such as females being at higher risk than males, it is difficult to generalize and point out surefire indicators of people in high-risk situations who need to be persuaded by stronger narratives of trustworthiness.

The perception of risk also has to do with expectations, which can be more or less (un-)certain (Luhmann, 1995, cf. Zinn, 2008). What is expected by CouchSurfers of the interaction definitely shapes the narratives built. From the data, I can generally categorize expected interactions into 3 layers: (1) the CouchSurfer expects that she will not be harmed in any way, (2) the CouchSurfer expects to get along with the other CouchSurfer, and (3) the CouchSurfer expects to have a meaningful cultural exchange. Different expectations of the interaction require different information to form the narratives of trustworthiness – for instance if one's biggest concern is personal safety, she would form a narrative about her host/surfer's probability of hurting her. These expectations are viewed as layers because one can require one or more. Generally, most people that I've talked to require positive outcomes for at least the first two layers. The more layers of expectations that one has of the interaction, the more intricate the narrative needs to be.

> "I found a host in Brno [a city in Czech Republic], I went to her place, but she told me she was feeling very sick, and she was in fact quite sick. And after a night at her place she said, 'I really don't think I can handle people here right now and I don't want to get you sick as well.' And so, instead of saying 'OK, we're done, go find a hostel', she took me to a CouchSurfing meeting, she introduced me, she said, 'this girl's surfing with me but I'm sick, she needs another host', and she made sure I had one. I think, I think that it put a lot of faith into me, into the idea of CouchSurfing and the people who put the faith in it. And I have found, even if I don't connect with my host or my surfers, on a personal or social level, at least everyone offers each other the common courtesy of making sure that everyone has a place to sleep and they will be safe. And I guess that's why I'm able to trust couch surfing."

As stated by the quote above, Respondent #31 expected only an assurance of a roof over her head, and did not require more from her interaction with her host. Indeed, there are different levels of "getting along". As put by a respondent, "maybe

we will click, or maybe we will coexist" – and she stressed that she had no problems in "coexisting". One's expectations may also vary according to circumstances. For instance, due to time constraints, one may have more stringent filtering of an incoming guest to ensure an experience that is more worthy of one's time.

Respondent #24, another respondent who is very passionate about CouchSurfing as a project for getting to know new people and new cultures, described the different layers of trust when she looks at a person's profile. She started off by insisting on a picture, for practical reasons of recognizing the person when they meet, and also to "make sure it's a real person".

> "So pictures definitely, and some basic information to be there. Like about the person, you know, their age, what they do, like if they actually study, or have some sort of job, or u know, some basic things about themselves. Yeah, just to make sure that it's a person. And of course, also, at a more advanced level, [I] would like to know if this is the type of person that I usually get along with. Because, yeah you meet someone quite intimately, so it would be nice to make sure that this is the kind of person that you get along with. And usually, you will get along with anyone who is sort of normal and interested and… yeah, I do check for all these things and definitely read the whole profile before I accept them.
>
> Usually, two lines will be enough to make sure that you get the right impression. But, yeah, I like reading about them, you know, before meeting them. It will be a nice start to your contact. And also the message that the person writes to you, it's quite important because you can usually tell like why they are visiting your country, or the place you live. And it's also a nice start, because we, because, yeah, if someone is like a tourist, then usually they will share their intention, and intentions are important as well, I think. Trust would be like, to like get a good vibe or something from the person. Like, they put in some effort to write you a message. […] I might still trust someone who like, asks for a cheap place to sleep, but then it's completely different, and you will be a bit more distant to that person maybe. That's the vibe you get from that person. Yeah, it departs from what CouchSurfing is supposed to be, I think."

Later on, she stressed that she wants a match in terms of enthusiasm and views towards CouchSurfing:

> "I rejected a couple of people on the basis of their profile being too empty. So there was no information at all, there was just a name, and maybe not even a picture of it. Just, yeah, no information at all about the person. And actually my own profile is quite extended. It is really big. It's… yeah, some personal information as well. Like my hobbies, and my personal philosophy, and pictures, and why I like CouchSurfing, and I just put effort into it because I like it as well. I really like the project. So, I… Yeah, of course I make like a

nice and enthusiastic profile. And yeah, if someone wants to stay with me, I expect some of that attitude as well, I think."

I have found that in most instances, the trustor tends to trust people who match them in terms of expected interactions. The narratives focus on storylines of what the other person expects, and if it measures up to what the trustor expects herself. Therefore, the information collected by the trustor centres around her own expectations and the narratives of trustworthiness are arranged according to whether the other party would disappoint one's own expectations of the potential interaction. For instance, at the layer of personal safety, one reads the profile to see if there are any indications of past transgressions described in the references. At the layer of "getting along", one may look out for information on taste in music and books, or political and philosophical views, etc. For cultural exchange, one may look for interesting information in the profile. It is up for the individual to define what is interesting to her of course. Real examples of interesting information on a profile, as provided by the respondents, include the following: "She was interested in medieval horses… that really stood out in her profile", "He was a Swedish ambassador!", "They were living in a commune, and I was interested to know what it's like to live in a commune", and so on.

Conclusion

Through the multiple examples of how people create narratives, we can see that the formation of narratives is a complex matter. From the community level, a metanarrative of CouchSurfing being a community of reflexive cosmopolites enables narratives to be formed about its members, and provides a framework of norms and taboos for the trustees to navigate. The micro-level interpretations of the context bring in other layers of complexity from an individual level, where the members behave in seemingly idiosyncratic ways, which are mostly centred on risk perception and expected outcomes of the interactions.

Some patterns can be observed. The level of influence (or indeed, usefulness) of the metanarrative depends on how closely one identifies with the CouchSurfing community. It is typical that older members view CouchSurfing more as a community, and hold higher regard of the metanarrative, because of a longer period of socialization under the mainstream paradigm of reflexive cosmopolitanism. On risk perception, the higher the risk perceived, the more elaborate the narrative built needs to be. There are

also different expectations of what one wants from the system, which also affects the type of risk perceived. I have found that there are three different layers of expectations – one may expect not to be harmed, or to get along with the host/surfer, or have a genuine cultural exchange. Narratives of trustworthiness surround these expectations, to see if the other party would measure up to these expectations.

For the trustor, there are two main uses for the narratives of trustworthiness in building trust. As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, the narratives have to "make sense", as to rule out initial doubts of the honesty and integrity of the trustee. A coherent storyline is needed, of one's background and motivations for initiating contact as a surfer, or for hosting. Secondly, finding a good host/surfer match (thus leading to a positive experience) is the universal goal of the actors within the system. Before an offline interaction is initiated, the trustor weaves the narratives that describe the potential interaction, based on information gathered from profiles or requests online. The closer the imagined interaction is with the desired interaction, the easier it is for the trustor to make the leap of faith to make the connection. Although cultural exchange is touted as a major motive to do CouchSurfing, the irony is that most people end up choosing people that are similar with themselves to interact with. CouchSurfers may look for diversity in matters such as demography, occupations, and localities. However, in matters of world views, ideologies and expected CouchSurfing interactions, they seek compatible partners.

The next chapter will continue expanding on these points, zooming into purposeful presentation of self and strategies that are used in forming narratives of trustworthiness.

CHAPTER 5 – STRATEGIES OF PRESENTING ONESELF ON E2F-SNSS

The idea of CouchSurfing.org was conceived by Casey Fenton, who was inspired by a successful attempt to request for free hospitality on a budget trip to Iceland. By emailing 1,500 students in University of Reykjavik, introducing himself and his intention of staying for a few nights on someone's couch, he managed to get dozens of positive replies and eventually, chose a host. In an interview with him, he described his thought processes while drafting the email:

> "Going to Iceland, I knew that one of the things I needed to do is show myself as trustworthy. I thought about that and thought, what are all the ways I can show that I'm trustworthy? I can send them pictures of me smiling. That's kind of a nice thing. Multiple pictures. I can provide a lot of information on myself, it would be markers of like, a sophisticated interesting person, a person who has enough knowledge, and has enough of means in the world, that they're not coming to steal my television. They don't have an interest in that. They have an interest in meeting me. So I talked about my personal philosophy, what makes me tick, what I like to do. And everything that I could think of and can fit into a one-page kind of thing. Pictures.A link to my website, if people want to go further. And so, in the CouchSurfing context, I'm always thinking of more ways for people to, you know to show more of that trustworthiness. It can be through of course friend links and references and vouches, you got so many of these little things, and another one that I think would be really cool is a video. Where you can embed a video, that's a million words, let's say. If you watch them on a video showing you around their house you got a good sense of who they are. And then when you come to the door and say hello, you actually feel like you already kinda know them."

In what would be an early version of a CouchSurfing request, Fenton wrote the email (to potential hosts in Iceland) and included the information that he thought would be important for people to make a judgment on his trustworthiness. The beginnings of the idea eventually evolved into the CouchSurfing website of today, with all of this information arranged in a standard format for the perusal of both hosts and surfers.In this chapter, I am interested to explore the strategies and processes of presentation of self on e2f-SNSs, from a user-to-user perspective. The Couchsurfer is both the trustor and the trustee. The e2f-SNS offers a comprehensive set of tools, such as the personal profile, the trust mechanisms, and the messaging services, all designed to facilitate a successful transition from the online to the offline. Through these tools, the narratives as discussed in the previous chapter are conveyed and interpreted. Before getting into the specifics on how people strategize the conveyance and

interpretation of the narratives, it is important to first have an understanding of the overarching, fundamental theoretical background on how people present themselves in everyday life.

Presentation of Self in SNSs

What is presentation of self? The work of Erving Goffman, founder of dramaturgical sociology, is cited in any work that mentions presentation of self or impression management. A theatrical metaphor is used to study social interactions, describing everyday individuals as actors who translate their "desires, feelings, beliefs, and self-images into communicable form, drawing on words, gestures, scripts, props, scenery, and various features of [their] appearance" as a role performance (Sandstrom et al., 2005, p.104-105). These performances are observed by their interaction partners, the audience. The actors prepare for their performance in the private back stage (e.g. the kitchen of a restaurant) and perform it on the front stage (the serving area, in front of patrons).

This is also known as impression management, described simply as "the process by which people convey to others that they are a certain kind of person or possess certain characteristics" (Leary, 1996, p.17). The front, i.e. the "expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (Goffman, 1959, p.32) is composed of three key components: the setting, the appearance and the manner. The setting is the scene in which the performance is enacted, including furniture and décor. The appearance and manner are two parts of the personal front, the former being signals of social statuses such as gender, ethnicity, class and etc.; and the latter is concerned with the signals of the interaction role that the performer is playing, such as the style of behaviour, disposition or mood and etc. These are all arranged and manipulated by the actor to produce desired effects. This does not mean, however, that the actor is intentionally deceiving his audience. As argued by Edgley (2003), there is a difference between the dramaturgical principle and dramaturgical awareness. The dramaturgical principle is that when people engage in social interaction, they engage in presentation of self, universally and in all situations. However, they may not be dramaturgically aware, i.e. the actor may not be aware of the performance that is going on; the level of awareness may be dependent on factors such as the significance of the audience, to name an example.

According to Goffman (1959), there are two types of sign activity that goes on when an actor attempts to interact with others. The first is the expression "given", i.e. "verbal symbols or their substitutes which he uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the others are known to attach to these symbols"; and the second, expression "given off", i.e. "a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way" (p.14). The actor uses either way to present him/herself, and the audience engages with the actor in a form of "information game" (ibid, p.20), where the audience tries to view the performance critically to uncover the actor's act. Goffman posits that one is better at spotting "calculated unintentionality" than at portraying it, so the audience often has an advantage over the actor. One may think that the audience is motivated to wreck the performance, but performance wreckage causes embarrassment for everyone involved, so more often than not the audience can be expected to be tactful about slippages in performances (Sandstrom et al., 2005).

Presentation of self on SNSs has been an often-studied topic (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Richter et al., 2009). Many of these studies focus on Facebook and Myspace, two of the largest and most popular SNSs in the world. Examples of such studies include multiple presentations of self in a corporate environment (DiMicco & Millen, 2007), self-presentation strategies for dating (Lee & Bruckman, 2007), taste performances (Liu, 2007), dramaturgical capitalization of positive emotions (Sas et al., 2009), etc. Although the importance of self presentation varies from SNS to SNS (Richter et al., 2009), it can be safely assumed that self presentation is carried out in any SNS, because of the visibility of the profiles to facilitate social interaction.

Boyd (2006) argues that mediated environments change the situation for impression management, for bodies are not visible thus eliminating the conventional "front", or mask, and one essentially has to "*write themselves into being*" (p.12, emphasis in original). In the case of SNSs, the tool available to represent oneself is generally the online profiles, which is a page including "a self-description, comments from other users, and the technology's defining feature, a list of links to chosen other members" (Donath, 2007, accessed online). Boyd (2004), in her study of Friendster profiles, includes these in the elements of SNSs, with demographic information and pictures added. One can "inspect, edit and revise" one's self-presentation before it is made available to others (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001:110). It is also observed

by boyd (2004) that online profiles stay relatively unchanged, or "stuck in time", in her work on Friendster profiles. According to boyd, the profile "represents how the individual chooses to present their identity at a specific time and with a particular understanding of one's audience" (p.2), and profile information, including the friend information, are rarely updated. However, there has been no empirical study to track users' updating on profiles, so this can only be considered anecdotal; though it is certain that comparing to one's presentation of self in everyday interactions, the profile information is comparatively constant. The relatively stagnant profile content seems to be the case with profiles on CouchSurfing as well.

Other than obvious profile elements of self-description and photographs, impression management extends further. One can articulate one's social network to as a form of self-presentation, like the number of friends one has, the type of friends or the attractiveness of one's friends (Walther et al., cited from boyd 2007). As mentioned before, signalling theory can be used to explain that social networks can give off signals of trustworthiness (Donath & boyd, 2004, see Chapter 2). The interactive segment of the profile, e.g. the testimonial section of Friendster, or the "Wall" of Facebook, also can be a tool for impression management (boyd & Heer, 2006). In other cases, one can manipulate the profile layout and design (boyd, 2007). These elements would "give" and "give off" expressions. In terms of performances on SNSs relative to everyday interaction in real life, actors have more control over the expressions that they give, but unfortunately fewer communication cues also subject the expressions to easier misinterpretation (boyd, 2007).

There is no doubt that impression management is carried out in everyday interaction. What is relevant to this study is, in e2f-SNSs, how does one present oneself, and to what purpose? In order to build trust, trustors build narratives about the potential interaction, which enable them to suspend the unknown and make the leap of faith. The trustees play an important role in supplying the fodder for the narratives. The "information game" between the trustor and the trustee is played with the dual objectives of ascertaining the authenticity and honesty of the trustee, and making sure that the expectations of both parties match. The platform, CouchSurfing.org facilitates the interaction with its inbuilt trust mechanisms and information architecture. It is also a trustee in its own right (and this will be addressed in the next chapter). In the following sections, I delve into the intricacies of how the

actors within the system strategize their presentation of self to build the narratives of trustworthiness.

Performing Cosmopolitanism as Subcultural Capital

Linking back to the earlier arguments about a metanarrative guiding narrative building, I would like to introduce the concept of subcultural capital to explain how actors within the system perform and interpret signals according to a metanarrative of reflexive cosmopolitanism.

Subcultural capital and its applications

Sarah Thornton, in her study of club cultures in the UK, draws upon Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital to be applied on subcultures (Thornton, 1996). The concept of cultural capital has been very useful for social scientists in areas of the maintenance of social stratification systems, as well as social reproduction and mobility while taking into account structural constraints and human agency (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Lamont and Lareau (1988), in a widely cited paper, sieve through the work of Bourdieu and Passeron, and define cultural capital as "*institutionalized, i.e. widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion,* the former referring to exclusion from jobs and resources, and the latter, to exclusion from high status groups" (p. 156, emphasis in original). In other words, people who own cultural capital are able to attain higher statuses in society. Research on cultural capital has focused very much on education (Lareau & Weininger, 2003) and is often linked to "high" culture, or cultural knowledge of the upper classes (Robson, 2009).

A crucial difference between "subcultural capital" (as coined by Thornton) and cultural capital hinges on the issue of class, as Thornton argues that class "does not correlate in any one-to-one way with levels of youthful subcultural capital" (p.187). Thornton's notion of subcultural capital agrees with Bourdieu's view of cultural capital in social mobility through purposeful display of appropriate cultural signals, but removes the idea of class and thus the debate on one class dominating another, and distances the concept away from classic capital theory. Using the idea of cultural capital but discarding the undertones of class and high culture, Thornton (1996) looks at subcultures and how the actors perceive and conceive "hipness" in objectified and embodied subcultural capital. One is considered to be cool if one is in possession of

certain rare objects such as limited edition records, or is able to use appropriate slang. Actors that own subcultural capital enjoy status "in the eyes of the relevant beholder" (Thornton, 1996:11). Although the concept of subcultural capital originated from observation of club cultures in the UK, subcultural capital has been applied in a variety of other contexts, such as on underclass culture in Australia (Bullen & Kenway, 2005), underprivileged young men in Denmark (Jensen, 2006) and Tikyan street boys in Indonesia (Beazley, 2003), young and wealthy "Stockholm Brats" in Sweden (Ostberg, 2007), spectator identity of world football (Giulianotti, 2002), etc.

In application of Thornton's notion of subcultural capital, researchers exercise discretion and not all apply the distinctions that she identified. There are, however, some commonalities with the research done. Firstly, the concept is deployed within subcultures, which can be defined as "groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it. They may represent *themselves* in this way, since subcultures are usually well aware of their differences, bemoaning them, relishing them, exploiting them and so on." (Gelder, 2005, p.1, emphasis in original) Secondly, research is done to see how, within an alternative space and hierarchical order, actors are able to gain status, by amassing knowhow and attitudes prized within that space. Thornton offers two manifestations of subcultural capital: they can be embodied within the individual, like the ability to dance well; and they can be objectified, where individuals would own certain relics like a limited edition CD, for example. Thirdly, studies that use the conceptual framework of subcultural capital usually identify an underlying trait that is important to the community, be it "hipness" (Thornton, 1996), "expressive masculinity" (Jensen, 2006), "toughness" (Bullen and Kenway), "stylishness" (Ostberg, 2007) or something else. This underlying trait may present different manifestations but provides a basic foundation from which the members of the community will carve their behaviour.

Researchers on SNSs have referred to Sarah Thornton's work on subcultural capital (Donath, 2007; Liu, 2007; boyd, 2007; Bigge, 2006), within studies such as Liu's work on taste performances via social network profiles and Donath's mention of online fashion, but no in-depth analysis have been done using the concept. I posit that in an e2f-SNS, the knowledge and efficacy to portray oneself based on relevant subcultural capital is actually a prerequisite in establishing trust, given that the online profile is virtually the only presence one has in the community, when social capital

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ispresumably limited. It is generally agreed that different types of capital are convertible to each other, and Bourdieu himself considers the question of conversion as central to the concept of capital (Jensen, 2006). In a social network site where connections form online and is extended offline, purposive accumulation of subcultural capital by the individual actor (through building a strong profile, communicating online and offline in a socially accepted way) builds trust, which is then converted into social capital. A continual expansion of one's social network is dependent on one's accumulation of subcultural capital, and the online profile can be likened to one's resumé of his/her subcultural capital. Presentation of self via the online profile is therefore imperative tocreate a personal front, from which the readers of the profile can decide if they are interested to initiate contact.

Performing cosmopolitanism as subcultural capital

Here, we return to the metanarrative of Couchsurfers as reflexive cosmopolites. There are two major concepts relevant to the current discussion: cosmopolitanism and subcultural capital. As a brief recap, cosmopolitanism is seen as the keenness to embrace cultural diversity and differences, and is conceptualized as a toolkit of habits, skills and styles from which people develop strategies of action; it is a disposition performed. Subcultural capital is widely shared cultural signals within a subculture, including attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and credentials used for social and cultural exclusion. Theoretically, it is possible to form a juxtaposition of these two concepts, and suggest that Couchsurfers strategize their actions and behaviour according to cosmopolitanism as the underlying trait that is prized within the community, and gain status and social acceptance through relevant presentation of self. The examination of social norms on Couchsurfing also suggests that mere cosmopolitanism is not sufficient – one has to have the qualities of a *reflexive* cosmopolite who upholds certain emotional and ethical commitments on interactions with people of other cultures.

In other words, Couchsurfers manage their impressions (à la Goffman, 1959) based on reflexive cosmopolitanism, giving and giving off expressions of being an open-minded, travel-savvy individual, to be socially accepted and trusted. The operative word, "performing" can give off the connotation that there is deception involved, however I would like to repeat(from Edgley, 2003) that this is not implied: the actor may not be aware of the performance that is going on, and the level of

awareness   about the performance varies. Most respondents interviewed have experience in hosting or surfing, and have clear ideas on the qualities of a "good" Couchsurfer, and how to go about presenting oneself as one. However, I have been approached by first-timers who are interested in trying out the system, who ask me questions on "the best way to write a request" (Respondent #39), how to read a profile, what information to put on the profile, what to expect from the experience, what the etiquette is in terms of showing appreciation to the hosts or entertaining a guest, etc. This provides an interesting insight into how new Couchsurfers learn to recognize what behaviours and attitudes are normal within the community, and also how to form and manage impressions when one immerses oneself into the system. Having subcultural capital means that one has to know the appropriate cultural signals to emit, and also recognize the signals when received.

As put by Kendall et al. (2009), the cosmopolitan individual is

"an ideal type of symbolic specialist, someone in possession and command of the cultural knowledge and skill to discern, appreciate and *use* the field of cultural difference. The cosmopolitan possesses specialist knowledge, forms of appreciation and particular ways of seeing which equip them with skills to transform the existence of otherness – rendered through globality or other forms of intercultural exchange – into a particular ethical-aesthetic value that, in so being transformed, cultivates a type of cultural capital. This ability to see, understand, then transform otherness into a consumable (knowable, malleable, resource-giving) cultural object is a valuable skill in the globalizing world. Through access to discourses of connectivity, openness and inclusivity, the cosmopolitan cultivates a capacity to frame and then appropriate cultural otherness." (p. 109, emphasis in original).

I would like to add that in the context of Couchsurfing, ample tools and space are provided, online and offline, for these cosmopolites to exercise these skills, and to mingle with other cosmopolites within the community of travellers.

If reflexive cosmopolitanism is performed, what is the stage? As Couchsurfers interact online and offline, they can present themselves on both communication channels. As mentioned earlier, there are two types of subcultural capital as explained by Thornton (1996), i.e. embodied and objectified. For Couchsurfers, it can be observed that embodied subcultural capital includes the ability to exhibit cultural competence in the form of politeness and respectfulness, interest in learning and sharing cultural differences and commonalities, and an awareness of the taboos mentioned earlier. This is manifested online through the efficacy of writing requests

and profiles; and offline in face-to-face interactions such as conversations and general impression management. The Couchsurfer learns about do's and don'ts through tips provided by Couchsurfing.org[19], asking for advice in the forum groups (there are some groups that cater specifically to this, e.g. "Advice for Hosts", "Reference Writing Support", etc.), or simply through trial and error.

As explained by a respondent with a lot of CouchSurfing experience (Respondent #20), there is a certain "recipe" to seem trustworthy:

> "Usually except if the profile is completely new, if it's the very first couch request, I tend to find enough information and in the request to make a decision [to host]. Any information that is not there, before I used to give a lot of advice on how to write it, what kinds of things to put in there. I stopped doing that because I don't have the energy and the time anymore. And I come to the conclusion that everybody signing up for CS needs to be at least 18 years, needs to be an adult, and if you request someone's hospitality you should have the minimum of intelligence and respect to provide that minimum of information. And if you don't have that intelligence or respect or whatever, then probably you don't deserve getting a couch. I am not babysitting anymore, the way I used to before. I always tried to educate the new members, I now come to the conclusion that maybe this is a good way of selecting the ones who should get the couch and the ones who shouldn't get it. It's another collection criteria, selection criteria, and I find that many other hosts come to that conclusion also. That you should not give them the recipe… the recipe for seeming like somebody trustworthy, when you aren't. That's the minimum that you can expect for somebody if you're requesting to stay with somebody, that you give them the necessary information. But it depends, I do it on case-by-case basis. If I feel that somebody's genuinely a nice person that I'd like to meet and somehow missed this point or didn't think enough about it, then I may still give some suggestions, but I am cautious now not to turn freeloaders into people that seem trustworthy and genuinely interested."

According to Respondent #20, it is important that one is "genuinely interested" and trustworthy, and these qualities should be second nature to the CouchSurfer. Being a reflexive cosmopolite, one does not send curt requests asking for couches without expressing interest in the local culture or the host that she is meeting. Steering clear of the taboos, such as solicitation of sex or being an overt freeloader, indicates embodied subcultural capital and that one is "in the know" about the values and beliefs dear to the community.

In the case of objectified subcultural capital, there are rich possibilities of presenting oneself as a world traveller and a competent cosmopolite in one's profile.

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[19]See http://www.couchsurfing.org/tips.html

One is able to specify countries travelled, languages spoken, "one amazing thing I've seen or done", CouchSurfing experience, pictures (which often depict the CouchSurfer in exotic places or surrounded by multicultural friends), and so on. Objectified subcultural capital such as references, friend links, vouches, various community designations (such as CouchSurfing ambassadorships) are accumulated with experience, and are displayed prominently in one's profile, suggesting one's cosmopolitan stance. Analogically, the requesting of a couch can be comparable to trying to get a job: one's couch request is her cover letter and the online profile is her curriculum vitae. The more extensive one's profile is, the easier it is to build a narrative about her, as a trustworthy and trusted member of the CouchSurfing community.

One has to start somewhere in profile-building. "In the beginning when you're still building up your network it's different, but now I'm on the other side where I'm more choosy about who I choose," said Respondent #18, a CouchSurfer with about 100 friends when I met and interviewed her. When she was a new CouchSurfer, she was more indiscriminate in choosing who she added to her friends list, and more liberal in giving out references. (In response to a positive reference, it is typical that one reciprocates with a similarly positive reference; the same goes with vouches.) Having accumulated sufficient credibility and built a strong profile, she could afford to be pickier with her friend links. The principle is the same with Respondent #17, a first-time CouchSurfer who was going to use the website to couchsurf in Buenos Aires, but decided to start hosting first, so that he could "integrate into the system" through having some "credentials" in his profile indicating his experience.

From [ ]
[ ] United States
Jan 30, 2010 👥 🖋️
Negative
Jun-E was uncommunicative and non-responsive. She expressed no desire to talk. Not once did she give any indication that there was something wrong with my visit.

I was having asthmatic difficulties while visiting Jun-E. My blood oxygenation was extremely low and I had trouble breathing, hence my lack of mobility. Sitting was about all I could do.

For [ ]
[ ] United States   edit
Jan 29, 2010 👥 🧳
Negative
[ ] was ill when he surfed my couch. That might have been the cause of his stern expression most of the time. He did not go out but stayed in and watched TV the whole 3 days he was here. I felt rather uncomfortable in his presence because of said stern expression, and because he tended to speak in a loud voice.

He was supposed to stay for four nights, but on the third morning he just disappeared without any notice, before me and my housemate even woke up. We have no idea what happened. I would have appreciated a goodbye note at least.

Figure 5-1 Example of Negative References (taken from my profile)

The utility of accumulated subcultural capital on one's profile becomes apparent when one's profile is pitted against another in a dispute, usually manifested in the form of negative references. In one's CouchSurfing profile, references from Actor A to Actor B, and from B to A are displayed together to provide a clearer context of the interaction that happened, whether positive, negative or neutral (see Figure 5.1 for an example). It is quite common for readers of profiles to compare two profiles to form a better idea of what happened, especially when negative references are posted. The profiles contain tangible numbers (of friend links) and documentation of past experiences (in the form of references) left by other members of the community. Reputation within the community can be quantified *and* qualified. In this case, the objectified subcultural capital becomes prominent.

Negative references as depletion of subcultural capital

In CouchSurfing, the main trust mechanisms are references, verification, and vouches. Among these, references are the most relied on. As a type of reputation systems, references should (1) provide information that allows the reader to make trusting decisions, (2) encourage community members to act in a trustworthy manner,

and (3) discourage untrustworthy members (Resnick et al., 2000). For these, negative references are especially important.

 "How I feel about negative references? Erm, there are a few parts of it. On one hand, when I first see a negative reference, I tend to think, oh, this person doesn't know what it means to be a true Couchsurfer, and I'd get a little righteous about it. On the other hand, it's kind of nice to see negative references, because they are so rare, and it means that someone is willing to be honest about a negative experience that they had. I think, I don't know about other cultures but something I've noticed in Americans is, in order to be polite, you do your best not to offend and not to complain. And so, if you were a little uncomfortable, but not really uncomfortable, you are not as inclined to leave a neutral or negative reference. So I found that, from time, an interaction with someone with a lot of positive references is not – you know, the person isn't as lively or interesting as the references may have guaranteed they were. Because people are inclined to say good things rather than bad things about each other." (Respondent #31)

According to Adamic et al. (2011), there is a "near absence" of negative references, and the ratio of positive to negative references on Couchsurfing is 2500:1. This phenomenon echoes that of Resnick and Zeckhauser's study (2002) on eBay's reputation system, where they found that feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Resnick and Zeckhauser attribute that to general courtesy, reciprocity, and fear of retaliation. For CouchSurfing, the factors that deter the writing of negative references are similar. The differences are that users have online profiles that are anchored onto their offline identity, and the exchanges referred to in the references are usually face-to-face interactions.

Firstly, in everyday interactions, it is customary to support the performance onstage, and writing a negative reference is akin to breaking the performance, because this involves a public statement against the character of the performer. As explained by Respondent #20,

"The fact that it's public, it's good in one way, but it has this limitation that it prevents people from saying honestly what they want to say, because they're afraid of – it can be cultural, for instance in Asian cultures, it is not done, to make people lose face. You don't say nasty things, on a website, that people share. […] This is one of the reasons why I feel there needs to be a separate system where people can provide feedback in an anonymized way, confidentially, agglomerated, aggregated, where it cannot be traced back to the person that gave you the reference."

The fact that one's online and offline identities are connected on e2f-SNSs actually impedes honest feedback. Online identities anchored to the offline selves are

often perceived to be more trustworthy and authentic, because one is not protected by the veil of anonymity. However, the lack of anonymity also situates one in a specific social context that comes with its history of an established relationship between the actors. For Respondent #26, the relationship between herself and a host was enough to deter her from leaving a negative reference, as she was unwilling to be "unappreciating" after receiving free hospitality:

> "I wouldn't leave a negative reference to a host. Because he hosted me, and even if he was really dirty, and he was a jackass, and, the food was terrible, the couch was very uncomfortable – he still hosted me. And that does not deserve a negative reference. Again, unless sexual harassment and stuff. I think with that, I might just not leave a reference. Or a neutral one.A neutral one, maybe. But a negative reference for a host, that's so unappreciating. I don't know if I'd have the heart to do it. Because you still lived with that person and you still got to know them. Everybody has their positive side. A negative reference, that's a big deal. But maybe a neutral one just to warn people, to maybe not stay there. I would certainly look at all the other references first, and if they all had a great time, maybe it was just me, so then I might not write one. If all the others left a positive one, but in not a positive way, I would go with neutral. Yeah. Surfers would get a negative reference, a host wouldn't."

Secondly, the very act of complaining about the experience implies that one is not open-minded enough to enjoy cultural exchange. This might explain why CouchSurfers have a high threshold of toleration of uncomfortable experiences, with respondents reflecting that the experience should be "really, really bad" (Respondent #08) to warrant a negative reference. When asked about these situations, it is usually something that is beyond individual or cultural differences (for instance, in terms of personal hygiene, differing political views, etc.) and is overtly deviant in general, such as extreme racism, theft, rape, etc. These fall under the clear category of wrong behaviour that transcends cultural oddities. As the quote from Respondent #26 demonstrates, some CouchSurfers would even water down such negative references to neutral ones, regardless of the severity of the problem. It is also interesting that Respondent #26 mentioned that she would first consider references left by other people. References are left within the social context of Couchsurfing, and it is not uncommon for Couchsurfers to seek advice from forums like "Reference Writing Support" to validate one's decision to leave a negative one. Societal pressure to be a reflexive cosmopolite – to be seen as one who celebrates cultural differences instead of complaining about them – provides a big demotivation of leaving negative references.

Thirdly, leaving negative references is a difficult decision because there is a high probability that one will receive one in retaliation.

> "In the beginning I wrote negative, and then she said [in a high pitched voice] "Why are you giving me a negative, nyah nyah nyah". […] So I said to myself, calm down, you're on a social network, and if you are aggressive towards that girl, she'll be aggressive to you, and what if she gives you a negative opinion? Then I rethought about what happened, then I said, ok it's not that important, what happened, so I said ok, I'll give her a positive." (Respondent #19)

Negative references tend to deplete one's subcultural capital (as a black mark on one's profile), which is why retaliatory negative references are such a threat. Members who are new and have few references are at a disadvantage, as older and more established members win the numbers game. The absence of negative references reinforces the image of a trustworthy website and community. The metanarrative of Couchsurfers being reflexive, cosmopolitan individuals paints a trustworthy and ethical collective image; and Couchsurfers, having to live up to that collective image, strategize their behaviours and attitudes within the context of the system.

Forming Narratives through Expressions Given Off

> "It crossed my mind the very first time when doing CouchSurfing, [in presenting myself as trustworthy], because I didn't have any sort of references to prove that I was a good person, I thought it would be difficult for [hosts] to know. The one thing that is not going to make people trust you is to say 'I'm a very trustworthy person', so, yeah, I didn't put anything specifically to show that I was trustworthy. I just thought putting something would be better than to put nothing." (Respondent #10)

Using the e2f-SNS platform of CouchSurfing, ample room is provided to "give" and "give off" expressions, a la Goffman (1959). One presents oneself as honest and culturally competent, with the goal of attracting suitable matches. Respondents generally express difficulty in describing themselves in words, and recognize that trust mechanisms such as references and friend links bear a heavier weight anyway. Therefore, while they mention posting pictures looking "happy, nice and friendly" (Respondent #37) or writing descriptions that gives other Couchsurfers "a flavour of what to expect" (Respondent #17), what is more interesting is how the respondents strategize their presentation of self to "give off" certain expressions, which is inherently perceived to be more authentic and trustworthy. In the information

game that the trustor and the trustee are engaged in, trustors try to read between the lines, and trustees manipulate the trust mechanisms to their advantage.

Reading and writing between the lines

"It's the Internet, of course the photos could be fake, the references could be fake. But it is very hard to fake many references. Everything could be fake. Sure. We could also live in the Matrix. I mean, yeah. I generally trust that no one actually took the time to have a hundred email addresses, to create a hundred profiles, to then write one profile a hundred positive references. That would be a lot of work, when you could just hide behind a car." (Respondent #26)

Respondent #26's rationale to trust references is similar to the thesis of Signalling Theory (see Chapter 2), i.e. the signal is considered more reliable when the cost of deceptively producing it outweighs the benefits. To many respondents, references are the most important part of the profile, since they are not written by the profile owner who appears to have no control over what is written. This corresponds to the warranting principle (Walther and Parks, 2002) that argues that people deem signals given from independent third parties as more trustworthy. References are publicly displayed, and the content of the references is not editable by the profile owner. Feedback of past interactions provides an idea of how future interactions may be.

As mentioned before, negative references are a rarity. Majority of CouchSurfers are reluctant to leave negative references. The fact that most references are positive brings forth some interesting implications. For instance, after a certain number of positive references owned, the content of the references ceases to matter as much. It is enough for most CouchSurfers to perform a cursory glance at the top few positive references and infer that the profile owner is real and has shared good experiences with other people. The trustor only takes what she needs to form the narrative of trustworthiness, and it is rare that one would scroll through all the positive references if the profile has many. As put by Respondent #4,

"I do read these – how do you call – references. But they're always good. I started reading them, but I kind of quit now, it's always like he's a nice guy, he's a nice guy."

Most respondents agree that truthful references help to maintain the trust within the community, and try to do their part in leaving useful feedback. The

difficulty of leaving negative references puts them in an awkward position of trying to present their negative experiences in a positive light, yet striving to make their views heard and their points clear. Here are some examples of CouchSurfers trying to get their message through while being diplomatic about it:

> "Of course, it's a show. It's a network. You are on stage. So you don't write negative things, you don't say that you are silly, [something], drug addict, alcoholic, no. Everybody's fine, everything's fine. But at the same time, when you want to express your real feelings, you can write them down on the network, but you do it diplomatically. You write facts, not opinions. And second thing, you write in a very brutal, matter of fact way. You state things very harshly. Bang bang bang! I did *that* and he did *that* and I did *that* and he did *that*. And everyone who reads you will understand what you mean. They'll understand that my experience with that person was really *bad*. She behaved *badly*. But you don't write bad, you don't write behaviour, and you don't write negative things, but, somebody who looks closely and reads everything on your profile will very easily understand that something went wrong with that person. That's what I did. Just stated the facts." (Respondent #19)

> "I wrote, well, 'he's a chatterbox who tries very hard to adapt to the common resident rules.' I mean, he did, and I appreciated it. But it also means that he hasn't adapted yet, he hasn't figured it out yet, and it was very hard spending time with him, because we were from very different cultures. And that was the first time, I would say, I had problems understanding the culture. But he just left me this loveliest reference, and I could never give him a neutral reference back." (Respondent #26)

> "At the end, I said, 'Thank you for what you did for me'. And I think if you read references carefully, you might notice that this one simple sentence is saying a lot. Because normally I write more and I write enthusiastically, very positive or positive, and so I thought – *hear my information* – this was *not* a positive reference. [laughs]" (Respondent #25)

The gap between what is read and what is written brings forth an interesting observation. The casual profile reader relies on quantitative data, i.e. the number of positive references, to infer that the trustee is trustworthy. In the meanwhile, writers of the pseudo-positive references assume that the trustor would focus on the qualitative aspect of what is written, and pick up on some hidden cues. The result of this is plenty of positive references, some of which are sincere and others are not. In any case, the *perception* of a trustworthy network through a high number of positive references aids the trustor in building narratives of trustworthiness, and to make the leap of faith.

Besides the content of the references or the number of them, other cues also provide information that the trustors look for. Since references are mostly positive,

CouchSurfers who are more careful try to read between the lines as well. For instance, even the gender of the feedback leavers can be an indication. A female respondent, Respondent #10 said that she would never stay with a guy who did not have any references from women. On the other hand, a male profile with mostly references from women was not a good sign either.

> "You know that type of profile, there are ten women saying that 'I had a wonderful 3 nights with him', 'He was very cute and showed me a good time', and so on – and there are no men leaving references. That's kind of suspicious, wouldn't you say?" (Respondent #32)

One-sided references (in the sense that only one party left the reference, while the other party did not reciprocate) may also be cause for concern. Some respondents perceive this as a possible signal of a negative experience from the side who did not leave the reference, as a result of the reluctance to write a negative reference and the unwillingness to sugarcoat the experience as a positive one. References labelled as "neutral" can raise similar concerns. When the perceived warning signs are triggered, the trustors read the profile more carefully, or investigate deeper into other profiles linked to it, to form a more elaborate narrative about the trustee, and eventually make the trusting decision of whether to host/surf, or not.

Manipulating trust mechanisms

Whilst reading and writing between the lines portrays and assesses trustworthiness in an indirect way, actors within the system also engage in other purposeful, more direct ways of manipulating the trust mechanisms of the system. These manipulations are not widespread, but they do and have happened, even from my firsthand experience. For instance, although references are mostly uneditable (unless they are flagged as inappropriate through the organization), it is possible to negotiate with the person leaving the reference.

It is encouraged in the References Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) of CouchSurfing[20] for the members to discuss negative experiences privately as the first step to conflict resolution, prior to leaving a negative reference:

> "In most situations, we encourage you to begin by contacting the other member privately to discuss the issue. Explain your perspective, listen to theirs, and

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[20] "Should I write a negative reference?" in the References FAQ page
http://www.couchsurfing.org/references.html/, accessed on 8/8/12

work towards an understanding. By using clear and honest and empathetic communication, it may be possible to come to a resolution. Be open to the idea that subtle cultural or ideological differences could be the root of your disagreement. Who knows -- if you're able to discuss it and learn about the cause of the conflict, it may end up being a positive or neutral experience after all! We all prefer to learn about cultural differences through friendship, but sometimes even disputes can lead to understanding."

As a side note, CouchSurfing.org is not the only website that tries to promote positive feedback in its reputation system. eBay.com does the same in advising its members to resolve problems privately and leave negative reviews as a last resort. Negative reviews are not prominently displayed, and the presentation of ratings skews the perception towards a positive view that most customers had satisfactory transactions. Resnick and Zeckhauser (2002) explain that it is a balance between displaying negative feedback that impedes untrustworthy behaviour in the system, and showing positive feedback that increases the overall perception of trustworthiness in the system.

An anecdote from my personal experience shows how the negotiation of references could happen. After leaving a positive reference for a host, she sent me a message, expressing her unhappiness and shock over my choice of words in the reference that could be construed as a negative opinion. I eventually changed the wording in the reference. There have also been stories about how one member was threatened with a retaliatory negative reference if she did not retract her negative reference, or how a member would ask for references from people that they had interacted with. These exchanges are invisible to the judgment of the person reading the profile. While one can negotiate behind the scenes for better references, it is also possible for the profile reader to message the reference leaver directly to discuss the trustworthiness of the profile owner. This is common advice to single women travelers for instance, to contact other single women travelers who had interacted with the male profile owner, to confirm that the positive reference was telling a complete story.

There have also been reports of "vouching parties", as explained by Respondent #20:

"I know that in certain areas, there's a real frenzy going on about vouching and people vouch for each other very easily, and you get vouches from people who don't really know you that much. They just met you and want to help you with vouches. There's some weird things going on with vouches, which kind of unfortunately, takes away the usefulness of vouching. If you want to go by the

vouches you really need to go into the detail to look at who vouched for this person. Are these very useful and reliable vouches? Are these vouches from meetings?"

The central idea around these manipulations is that people negotiate behind the scenes, in the backstage, to preparing for the performance on the front stage, one's profile being the public face. Warranting Theory (where information from the third party is considered more trustworthy) holds true, and the actors understand this. In this information game, trustees try to negotiate and form allies in the backstage, and trustors too attempt to reach behind the scenes to verify the signals sent. Finally, there is nothing to stop one from deleting one's profile and starting over. For members who have invested more in accumulating subcultural capital (of positive references, vouches, friend links, etc.), it is a tremendous effort to start over. However, there have been cases of thefts or other crimes within CouchSurfing that have involved people creating new profiles over and over again, as to erase their past and start anew.

Optimizing TheMatch

In one of my interviews, Respondent #5 offered to run me through the process of how he looks for hosts. Exhibit 5.1 shows his monologue while entering the search criteria and reading the profile of a potential host.

Looking for a host

If I'm looking for a host, the first thing that I do is to check – I try to make my search as good as possible. Like, if it's a bigger city, and if I see there are many people hosting – you can just check on the map, how many people are hosting – if I see there are many, then I'll say, ok, good, I only take the vouched persons. The people that I can trust. And then I usually make a search like, I think it's better if the person's a similar age as me. So I set the age between, I don't know, 20 and 30, something like that, depends on the number. Sometimes 35. And then what I do is that I order them by experience, maybe. Then I just go through [the list of people].

(Opens one of the profile links)

What I check first is the couch information. Language should be alright, at least one language should be, like, English, should be at least intermediate. Because some people would say that they're expert but they're not really good. And intermediate is like, this person is really basic but still possible to communicate, if you're lucky. So after intermediate, okay. Possible. But normally expert is better.

[…]

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And then usually I check the couch information, most people write where they are living. Not all of them write this, some can write nothing, and usually I don't pick these profiles. I think Couch Information is the most important part of the profile. If I'm looking for a host. For me, it is important that I know roughly where this couch is. So, if I say, okay it's in the city, it's a big city, it could be anywhere. It could be two or three hours outside the city. Which is very probably, if they just write city and there is no other city nearby, so could be anywhere. And I think if this person makes the effort of writing something, and they say "it's important for my surfer to know", I don't know, it's just easier. If I write a request, I usually do some kind of effort. The request should be proper. I can show that to you later.

So, like this person here writes, I live 30 minutes off a special place, 30 minutes off the Twin Towers, I mean, the Twin Towers is probably the most important place, it's central, I can roughly say it's not so far away. That's ok. So I know whereabouts it is.

And then I check – I check preferred gender [as specified by the host], if they write female, that means, for me, probably not. I don't even start to write the request, because it's useless. Some of them say, "ok, female but…." If that and that is the case, then no problem. And then I think if it's a really good profile, if this person really like, I should really surf with this one, then I should do it even though [they prefer females, but are open to males]. I will write a request. But if I'm unlikely to get the couch, I don't even try. Then one thing that's really important is that the "Couch is available", but I can filter this in the search. If they say "only coffee and drinks", then I don't even try.

And they write often like things that are important for them, like, "I work 24 hours a day, I don't have time for you". It depends if I need that or not. Sometimes I want to have contact with this person, sometimes not. For me, it's good to have a host who has like some one or two hours in the evening time, he doesn't have to spend all the time with me, but just a little time. Once I had a host, I didn't even meet this host, at all. I didn't see him. I only saw his Couchsurfer. He was out of his flat during the two days we were there. And, I mean, it wasn't a bad thing, it was okay. But it's not a typical thing. It was like an emergency couch, we didn't find anything, and it was ok, it was not a problem for us. But what I actually prefer is like, this person at least give us some of his time.

And second thing is, I don't like too many regulations with like, "you have to get out at 7 in the morning, or you have to be back at 9 in the evening", or if they do that – I don't know, for me… the best thing is they do it like me [when I host]. Like, "ok, you're vouched, you get the key, come back whenever you want." And for sure it's easier if I don't have to share a room with these people. I mean, if I have to, it's no problem, I did it before, but if I don't have to share it, it's easier for both, like waking up doesn't really affect each other. And yeah, then I just check, that's ok that's ok that's ok, and after all I usually write this person a request.

What a lot of people do, is like, write a keyword [within the couch information], which you have to mention in your request. This is what a lot of people do, I mean, I expect the surfer to read this part of the profile. The rest, you could read it when you're coming, or whatever. It's not so important as the couch information. Before I do the request, for sure I check if there are any negative references. Sometimes they have. If

> there is one, I really check who is the person who gave it. And then I check some of the positives, not all of them, I just roughly go through, ok ok ok, what did they write, sometimes when I'm not really sure I check, ok, who is this person who wrote this? Is it a person just new to the network, or is it someone who's vouched, if the references are ok, it could be a fake reference, you never know.

Exhibit 5-1 Looking for a host

Respondent #5, a seasoned Couchsurfer who had numerous experiences hosting and surfing, emphasized the importance of making a suitable host/surfer match. A quick glance at a potential host's profile was enough for him to form a picture of what she would be like, and imagine the interaction that could happen in the event of an offline encounter. Information important to him included age and a common language (in this case, English), as well as the location of the couch, and the expectations of the host. He did not question the authenticity of the profile, mainly because he only looked at profiles that were vouched for or had multiple friends, but read through the references. For references that he wasn't sure about, he even checked the profile of the person who wrote the reference. If he was happy with the profile, he would then send a request.

Another point brought up by Respondent #5 is the "keyword" (sometimes referred to as a "password") that many experienced hosts include in their profile, mostly within the Couch Information, or even in other parts of the profile. This is an interesting practice that is used by some hosts who are presumably inundated by couch requests, from surfers who mass-email requests without reading the profile first. Hosts would warn surfers that if the keyword is not mentioned within the request, the host would not entertain the request or even respond to it, as the surfer did not read the information (or instructions) properly. Similar judgments are made based on whether the couch request is addressed to the name of the host or not. Hosts tend to favour requests that begin with "Dear [host's name]", as opposed to an impersonal "Hi there!"

There are practical considerations to this. If the host is assured that the surfer had read (and agreed with) the information of the couch, she can assume that the surfer is informed about important details, such as the constraints of the host's schedule, or the presence of pets in the house (in cases of allergies), or the scarcity of public transportation, and so on. The expectations of the host and the surfer can be better synchronized if the surfer is aware of the logistical matters, with no unpleasant

surprises. As mentioned by Respondent #5, surfers would also be more inclined to send a request if the couch information is complete and informative. The other point to requiring a personalized request is the show of respect and appreciation, and it tells the story of a pleasant Couchsurfer and an amiable interaction. This connects to a previous point made about reflexive cosmopolitanism in the form of embodied subcultural capital – the sender appears to be interested in the host and her culture, and not only any free and available couch.

When asked if they think that their profile is attractive to others, some respondents gave some thought-provoking answers. As explained by Respondent #20, who has a profile with extensive information about safety and etiquette in CouchSurfing:

> "I think my profile is attractive to the people I want to interact with. But it is completely unattractive to a lot of other people who are looking for other things. People who are maybe just looking for having a great time, for partying, and for a free couch, they will not find my profile attractive. [laughs] They will look elsewhere. But the way the profile, my profile is written, I think it is a filter for me to be attractive for the kind of people that I would like to interact with."

The profile is not crafted to be universally attractive –Couchsurfers fill in their profiles with the intention of attracting only the type of people that they want to attract. This can be as simple as the consideration of not putting up provocative pictures of oneself, to prevent attracting "creepy messages from people who just want sex" (Respondent #18), or listing house rules in the couch information (to deter messy backpackers), and so on.

> "Providing a bit of your background may also make your experience nicer in the sense… I don't know. […] I see, for instance, many other people making it explicit their sexuality, because they feel that, hosts or guests may feel uncomfortable with their sexuality, especially in a world that does not fully accept that. There are people who say very clearly, I am gay, if you come here, you know, be aware of that, and support, you know. If you're a homophobic racist person don't come to my place. Because that's who I am. So I think it's also a way to, if you want, screen the people. So that the people who are coming to you know who you are, what you are doing, yeah." (Respondent #16)

The actors present themselves in their profile in a way that states their situation in life and their expectations, and even device ways to ascertain that other actors read their profiles before initiating an interaction. As put forth by Respondent #16, this pre-

filters the pool of people, and those who get past the filter are assumed to have a higher level of trustworthiness in the sense of offering a satisfactory experience. This exemplifies the point made in the previous chapter: the narratives are created with the end goal of making a good match, in terms of personality and expected interactions. The measures taken by people are subject to the level of expectations. Mostly, hosts have higher expectations as they share their material resources and time, and they want to be specific about the interaction expected. The metanarrative guides the expectations to meaningful cultural exchange with reflexive cosmopolites.

Conclusion

Through probing deeper into the specifics of the means and ends of presenting oneself on CouchSurfing, we are able to better understand how people convey and interpret the narratives of trustworthiness. The actors conform to and perpetuate the metanarrative through purposive accumulation of subcultural capital, which is objectified in profiles (as references, friend links, vouches, and various community designations) and embodied in communications (acting as a respectful guest who is interested to learn about other cultures). The socially desirable trait to be presented is that of reflexive cosmopolitanism, which is reflected in the objectified and embodied subcultural capital, generating trust which converts the subcultural capital to social capital. Actors use the tools given by the platform to read and write between the lines, as well as to manipulate trust mechanisms to construct the narratives of trustworthiness. Trust is a matter of perception. Although there are ways to game the system into one's advantage, hence decreasing the objective trustworthiness of trust mechanisms, the subjective (or perceived) trustworthiness in general is increased. Those who do think about the weaknesses of the trust mechanisms are wary about the projected trustworthiness, but form narratives of trustworthiness through digging deeper beyond the facade of the front stage.

Couchsurfers build profiles with the intention of attracting specific types of people. This differs from the findings of researchers of online dating sites, who argue that people present themselves on profiles to accentuate their attractiveness in general, and are only constrained by the fact that their identity is anchored onto an offline self that may not measure up to an overly exaggerated online image. My findings however indicate that Couchsurfers put less emphasis on being universally attractive, but focus instead on attracting people they are interested in interacting with. This is found to be

more prevalent in hosts, as they have higher expectations since they are the ones giving free hospitality.

CHAPTER 6 – FROM A COMMUNITY TO A SERVICE: A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF COUCHSURFING.ORG

Early History (1999 – 2006)

The story begins in 1999. Like it is often narrated, it started with the founder, Casey Fenton's trip to Iceland. Upon getting budget air tickets, he mass-emailed 1,500 students from University of Reykjavik (or University of Iceland, depending on the account) to request for a few nights' stay for free. The request was well-received, as he got over 50 positive responses, and spent an enjoyable weekend in Iceland with his host. This incident, along with previous experiences of hospitality in Egypt, inspired him to start a website that facilitated cultural exchange between travelers and locals. The idea of CouchSurfing was conceived on Fenton's flight home from Iceland to the US. In January 2003, with combined efforts of 3 other co-founders of the website (Daniel Hoffer, Sebastien Le Tuan and Leonardo Silveira), the beta version of the website was up and running. As described by Fenton in his blog,

> "When CouchSurfing first started, before the site was even in beta, it was literally just me programming for hours on end in my bedroom. As you can imagine, there was a limit to how much I could achieve, both in terms of my capabilities and in the amount of time I could devote to the project. I was working on CouchSurfing full time but even so, it wasn't enough. I knew I needed help from individuals with specific talents so in 2003 the other three founders joined me. After a couple of years we needed more help to keep the momentum going. I invited some of the awesome people I had met on my travels, along with a few active CouchSurfers I hadn't even met, to join us as site administrators ("admins"). With every person who joined us we were able to achieve a little more."[21]

The member base of CouchSurfing slowly grew. From 6,000 members at the end of 2004, the website gained traction and membership grew exponentially. In 2005, there were 45,000 members, which continued to grow to almost 100,000 in 2006.

The Age of the Volunteers (2006 – 2011)

Within the period of 2006 to 2011, CouchSurfing was run by a core team of members comprising of Casey Fenton and some other community members. The bulk

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[21] "Always Evolving" – Casey Fenton's blog - http://blog.couchsurfing.org/casey/2011/08/couchsurfing-always-evolving/ accessed online on 2/3/12

of the work was done mostly by volunteers, as the organization had a limited number of paid employees. CouchSurfing "Collectives", or gatherings of volunteers, were held all over the world, within time spans from a few weeks to a few months. Members of the community, mostly programmers, were invited to specific locations (see Table 6.1) to work together on the CouchSurfing website. Free meals and accommodation were provided.

In June 2006, the first CouchSurfing Collective was held in Montreal, Canada. During this period of time, the website experienced a serious database crash. In a letter sent to all the users after the incident[22], Fenton described it as "the perfect storm", where the hard drive had crashed and the backups weren't executed properly. Twelve of their most important data files were irrevocably lost, creating irreversible damage to the website. "CouchSurfing as we knew it doesn't exist anymore," wrote Fenton. Distraught, he decided to shut the site down. A video published on YouTube depicts the tense situation[23] at that time. As described by one of the volunteers interviewed: "The data was lost, people were very very upset. People cried. […] Just like a funeral." The feedback from the community upon receipt of the news was also overwhelming, as emails poured in and postcards arrived by post to the Collective, conveying words of encouragement and motivation for the website to continue. After receiving more than 2,000 positive emails, a consensus was reached to repair and improve the website. The volunteers at the collective worked around the clock to rebuild the website. A week after the announcement of the shutdown of CouchSurfing, CouchSurfing 2.0 was born. The volunteers celebrated the success of the relaunch, and Fenton was quoted to say, "It's an amazing time in CouchSurfing history. It seems like, perhaps, the most important time in CouchSurfing history right now."

The camaraderie of the community grew because of this incident, and more and more volunteers poured in to offer their services. CouchSurfing 2.0 was described as "a new focus on member participation to build CouchSurfing and the creation of an organization structure to support volunteers".[24] Fenton was the only paid employee

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[22] "Couchsurfing Deletes Itself, Shuts Down" - http://techcrunch.com/2006/06/29/couchsurfing-deletes-itself-shuts-down/ accessed online on 1/3/12

[23] "Couchsurfing – The Crash – Montreal 2006", by Claudia Bérubé and Pierre-Yves Beaulieu: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUD0LE0lx6g (accessed online on 1/3/12)

[24] Old CS Policy FAQ – The FAQ was last updated 21/7/2008. While the document does not indicate the period of time it was in effect, it shows the organization's stance on policy issues during the height of its volunteer years.
https://docs.google.com/View?docid=dfgj4wck_17gswzgx, accessed online on 1/3/12

from 2003 to 2007[25], and even after then the website had run on a very limited number of employees. Volunteers were responsible for most of the operations of the website. An organizational structure was formed in 2007, with five main teams: The Leadership Team, Operations, Community Operations, Marketing & Communication, and Product Development (See Appendix G). The Leadership Team (LT) oversaw the organization's strategic decisions and managed the departments of volunteers. The main stated requirement of a LT member was to be "genuinely driven by a commitment to The CS Mission", and at any time there would be more than 5 and less than 15 LT members[26]. The Leadership Team Profile (last updated May 22, 2007) listed 11 members and their roles[27], but did not reflect the membership changes throughout the years.

In December 2009, the organizational structure was readjusted, and the LT was renamed to Strategy Team. According the Team Member Newsletter (obtained through private communication with a volunteer), there were two reasons for this change:

> "First, over the years "Leadership Team" has referred to many different groups of people with different functions. Over time it has become a more and more confusing term as different people use it to mean different things. Second, the name was never the best for our community and culture. The role of all CS staff members is to support the community as we serve our mission, and we feel that the term "Leadership Team" is too closely connected in people's minds to corporate-style structures. The job of this team is to design and execute the organization's strategy for achieving our mission."

Casey Fenton remained to be on Strategy Team as the Executive Director, with a few others who held positions of General Manager, Chief Technology Officer, Chief Operation Officer and so on. The Operations department (holding Finance, Legal Coordination, Policy Unit, Human Resources, and Mission & Goals of CS) was absorbed into the Strategy Team, and the Strategy Team led the other teams with the functions of user support, promotion and website development, as shown in Appendix H.

There has not been much documentation of the numbers of the volunteers, though it is stated within the Team Member Newsletter (December 2009) that there

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[25] Old CS Policy FAQ, see above
[26]"Leadership Team", http://wiki.couchsurfing.com/en/Leadership_Team, accessed online on 1/3/12
[27] Profile of the CS Leadership Team, listing 11 members and their roles (last login date was on May 22, 2007) http://www.couchsurfing.org/people/csleadershipteam/ accessed online on 2/3/12

were 534 volunteers within the Translations Team alone. There were more than 2,400 CouchSurfing Ambassadors (who agree to commit 10 hours per week in online or offline activities pertaining to CouchSurfing) worldwide, according to some statistics shown to me by a volunteer early 2012. It is thus safe to say that there are thousands of volunteers in various capacities who donate a lot of time and energy to the system. A series of eight CouchSurfing Collectives were organized over the course of 5 years, up till 2010 (see Table 6.1). In addition to the collectives, a Base Camp was established in Berkeley, USA, in September 2008. The objectives of the Base Camp was to eliminate downtime between collectives, provide stability for on-site volunteers and longer term volunteering options, as well as to have a centre for legal and administrative tasks[28]. In June 2010, the Base Camp was closed down and the organization ran on a "virtual model"[29] with no fixed location for a year until the office in San Francisco opened[30].

	Montreal, Canada June - August 2006
	Vienna, Austria 21 - 30 July 2006
	Nelson, New Zealand October 2006 - March 2007
	Rotterdam, Netherlands 1 June - 31 July 2007
	Pai, Thailand 1 December 2007 - 31 March 2008
	Homer, Alaska 15 May - 22 August 2008
	Samara, Costa Rica 15 February - August 12 2009
	Istanbul, Turkey 15 October 2009 - 31 March 2010

Table 6-1 List of CouchSurfing Collectives (2006 to 2010)[31]

There were a number of controversies that riddled CouchSurfing over the years that it was largely powered by volunteers. In order to perform an analysis of trust, it is necessary to look into the violations of trust, which are discussed in the subsections below.

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[28] "CouchSurfing's newest Collective is off the ground in Costa Rica!" - http://www.couchsurfing.org/news.html?id=223, accessed online on 2/3/12
[29] "Always Evolving – Casey's Couchsurfing Blog" - http://blog.couchsurfing.org/casey/2011/08/couchsurfing-always-evolving/ accessed online on 6/3/12
[30] "CouchSurfing's New Neighbours - http://www.couchsurfing.org/news/article/133accessed online on 7/3/12
[31] Information retrieved from http://www.couchsurfing.org/collective.html, accessed on 1/3/12

The Non-Disclosure Agreement and Other Transparency Issues

One of the first controversies to arise was the issue of the strict Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA). The first NDA was in place from 2006, and many volunteers signed it under the impression that it would be changed. A volunteer of that time complained that, "the current NDA is simply ridiculous, it transfers all ***trade secrets*** from the volunteer to CouchSurfing. A trade secret is a very ill-defined term that literally can include anything you can think of, such as 'programming techniques' and 'software patents'. The NDA should be limited to giving CouchSurfing a ***license*** to use the work of the volunteer, it should not try to transfer copyrights or just ideas" (emphasis in original)[32]. According to a copy of the NDA (dated 16 June 2006, obtained through private communication with a volunteer),

> "Confidential Information may include, without limitation, Inventions (as defined in Section 2), trade secrets, technical information, know-how, research-and-development activities of the Company, product and marketing plans, customer and supplier information and information disclosed to the Company or to me by third parties of a proprietary or confidential nature or under a duty of confidentiality."

Further on in the document (Section 2), the signee of the NDA agrees to disclose and assign all rights of her "Inventions" to the organization, whereby "Inventions" is defined to include:

> "any and all ideas, concepts, discoveries, inventions, developments, original works of authorship, trade and service marks, software programs, software and systems documentation, trade secrets, technical data and know-how that are or have been conceived, devised, invented, developed or reduced to practice or tangible medium by me, under my direction or jointly with others during any period that I am or have been employed or engaged by, or am otherwise working with, the Company, whether or not during normal working hours or on the premises of the Company, which relate, directly or indirectly, to the Company's business of developing, marketing and selling technology for transportation analysis and management and arise out of my relationship with the Company."

About a year later, in May 2007, the new NDA in the form of a Volunteer Agreement was put into place[33]. Besides retaining all intellectual property rights of the

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[32] " Why a non-compete clause will be very harmful to CouchSurfing" http://www.opencouchsurfing.org/2007/05/08/why-a-non-compete-clause-will-be-very-harmful-to-couchsurfing/ , accessed online on 19/3/12

[33] I was not able to obtain a copy of the Volunteer Agreement and verify this claim, as the link was broken.

work done by volunteers, it also contained a non-compete clause. The developers were prohibited to work on "any travel or social network site simultaneously or 1 year after volunteering (working) for CS, professionally or otherwise"[34]. As the outcome of the incident, at least 4 of the core developers resigned from volunteering in CS, and one was fired from his position[35]. These former volunteers initiated a website called OpenCouchSurfing.org, to campaign for an open and free organization of CouchSurfing. Besides the issue of the NDA, it also protested against the organizational reluctance to use open source code. A petition was started, but ultimately the movement did not succeed. OpenCouchSurfing then became a platform for raising awareness about issues within CouchSurfing.

Later, it would be written in the old CS Policy FAQ[36] that the earlier version of the NDA was "incomplete in some ways, and overly protective in other ways". The FAQ stated that another new agreement should be ready by August 2008; and developers would own their contributions via the CouchSurfing Application Programming Interface. It is not apparent in the data that I have if the NDA was revised, and how. In the IRS denial letter for tax exempt status, it was stated that CS has "a confidentiality agreement that asks certain volunteers to sign if they have access to sensitive information like member data", and a "team member agreement" that "requires said individuals to assign all rights, titles and interest in inventions, patents, copyrights, trademarks, and registrations to [CS]"[37].

The NDA was only one facet of the lack of transparency and communication of CouchSurfing during the volunteer years. In the Policy FAQ, it was stated that meeting agendas and minutes were not published due to "uncensored brainstorming, safety concerns, and other topics not appropriate for all members to read". It explained that the organization was unable to provide them for public scrutiny because of the lack of volunteer resources to edit and publish these documents. There have been numerous complaints about the opaqueness of the organization, found mostly within resignation letters of volunteers or other discussions on the Brainstorming forum

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[34] "Round up" - http://www.opencouchsurfing.org/2007/05/16/round-up/, accessed online on 1/3/12
[35] "Volunteer Resignations – Couchwiki" - http://couchwiki.org/en/Volunteer_resignations, accessed online on 1/3/12
[36] Old CS Policy FAQ - https://docs.google.com/View?docid=dfgj4wck_17gswzgx, accessed online on 1/3/12
[37] CouchSurfing Team Member Newsletter #1 (December 2009), obtained through private communication with a volunteer

group[38] (later Brainstorming~ Redefined[39], where members discuss CS politics). The lack of transparency was also reflected in a list of 62 questions[40] compiled from volunteers directed to the management, showcasing interesting queries on issues of governance, which led to the writing of the policy FAQ.

My personal experience in doing research and data collection on CS largely mirrors the general sentiments on the lack of transparency. While trying to arrange a visit to the Base Camp in the summer of 2009, I realized that there was no official list of volunteers published anywhere on the website, and it took me some time to find someone who lived at the Base Camp to contact, by combing through forum discussions. On piecing together information on this historical account, I also found it difficult to obtain official information or past communications from the management team that wasn't buried within the mountains of forum discussions.

Organizational and Financial Issues

The lack of transparency and communication also led to much speculation on the legality of the organization behind CS and alleged mismanagement of the donations and verification fees collected by its members, among other matters. The Leadership Team, later known as Strategy Team had been accused of being opaque, and that its members were mostly close friends of Casey Fenton, although this was denied in the Policy FAQ. The effectiveness of the leadership was also questioned, in cases such as the Translations Team going on strike because of lack of support from the Strategy Team, and the difficulties in communicating across teams as a result of "the pyramidal structure of CS"[41].

Other matters of concern were the legal structure of the organization and the obtainment of the 501(c) 3 federal tax exempt status. CouchSurfing had been filing the application for the tax exempt status since the end of 2007, and it was repeatedly stressed that CouchSurfing would not become a for-profit[42]. A post on the forum by user Pickwick had stated in 2007 that Casey Fenton was misreporting certain facts of

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[38] Brainstorm – the original one - http://www.couchsurfing.org/group.html?gid=429 accessed online on 2/3/12

[39] Brainstorm ~ Redefined - http://www.couchsurfing.org/group.html?gid=7621 accessed online at 2/3/12

[40] "Leave your QUESTIONS ABOUT CS here!" http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7161&post=340697, accessed online at 2/3/12

[41] "Translations team on strike" - http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=6771487 accessed online on 6/3/12

[42] http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=429&post=1654953#post1677501

the organization, hence risking the successful application of the 501(c)3 status (see Exhibit 6.1). The application was ultimately rejected in 2011, the main reasons cited being that "the purpose of international networking is a purpose that is beyond the scope of tax-exempt purposes under section 501(c)3" and that CouchSurfing is not mainly serving public interest but the private interest of its members and that CouchSurfing has not shown that it is operating exclusively for the purpose of cultural education.[43]

Casey: please don't risk perjury
Posted December 14, 2007

1. Casey, you listed yourself as sole director in a report you filed with the New Hampshire Secretary of State on 24th December 2005 [1]. You again stated publicly on 28th January 2007 that you were still sole director [2]. This violated New Hampshire statute RSA 292:6-a according to which "the board of directors of a charitable nonprofit corporation shall have at least 5 voting members" [3].

On 14th November 2007 you eventually filed Annual Reports for the years 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006 with the Attorney General of New Hampshire, where under penalties of perjury you falsely stated the composition of the Board of Directors in 2004, 2005 and 2006 to be: Casey Fenton, Daniel M Hoffer, Leonardo Silveira, Sebastien G LeTuan.

My advice is to file a correction immediately. An investigation for perjury in connection with filed Annual Reports may have unfortunate consequences for the application for federal tax exempt status according to section 501(c)(3) IRS code.

2. New Hampshire statute also says in RSA 292:6-a that "No employee of a charitable nonprofit corporation shall hold the position of chairperson or presiding officer of the board" [3]. This means, Casey, that you need to resign either your chairmanship of the board, or your employment.

My advice is to do it immediately. An unlawful composition of the board or unlawful tenure of the board's chairman can have unfortunate consequences for the validity of board decisions or signatures on documents, like for instance the application for federal tax exempt status according to section 501(c)(3) IRS Code.

[1] http://www.sos.nh.gov/imaging/9649082.pdf
[2] http://groups.google.com/group/cs-dev-public/msg/c8d070ae5333e5f4?
[3] http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/XXVII/292/292-6-a.htm

Note by the researcher: [1] and [2] are inaccessible online as of 14/3/12, however I have obtained the soft copies from Pickwick

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[43] According to the IRS denial form, release date 30/3/11

Exhibit 6-1Casey: please don't risk perjury[44]

There were also speculations on the finances of CouchSurfing throughout the years by members of the community on the forums.[45]Skeleton income statements from 2004 to 2009 were published on the website[46] (but have since been removed), and the audited financial statement for 2010 posted by members can be found through the public forums[47]. Posts on the forums raised some interesting questions upon reading the financial statement of 2010. For instance, why did the amount of $275,000 that was put into reserves (in years prior to 2010) earn only $2,098 from interest? Since there was no balance sheet account or cash flow statement until 2010, it is not possible to say what actually happened to the money during these years. Also, there has been no account of what happened to the "savings reserve or emergency fund"[48] mentioned in the income statement accounts prior to 2010. Also, why and how did $3,900,000 of net operating loss carryforwards emerge when the total all-time revenue was only $4,359,499? There are no accounts of Couchsurfing's communication with the New Hampshire tax authorities, so it is difficult to figure out what exactly happened.

Because of the lack of transparency it is difficult to make any conclusive statement on the financial management of CouchSurfing thus far.

Sexual Harassment in the Base Camp

In the summer of 2009, a new controversy arose, regarding allegations of sexual harassment and volunteering conditions in the Base Camp and at an official CouchSurfing meeting in Vienna. Letters of resignation in the "mass exodus of the global ambassadors"[49] of 2009 are particularly illuminating on events that transpired. More than 10 ambassadors (who also volunteered under other capacities) resigned, according to the list of volunteer resignations on Couch Wiki, which provided the

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[44] "Casey: please don't risk perjury" - http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=429&post=576746 accessed online on 13/3/12
[45] 2011 – "2011 CS Financial Performance" - http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7621&post=11011062
2010 – "2010 independent audit of CS finances" http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7621&post=9834319
2009 – "2009 finances" - http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7621&post=7792302
All accessed online on 14/3/12
[46]CouchSurfing Finances, http://www.couchsurfing.org/about.html/financeaccessed online on 14/3/12
[47]"2010 independent audit of CS finances", http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7621&post=9834319accessed online on 14/3/12
[48] Income and Expense Statement of CS, 2009 - http://www.couchsurfing.org/organization_finances_2009.html, accessed online on 20/3/12
[49] Resignation Letter #21, see Appendix F

names of the volunteers and links to their resignation letters. In the resignation letter of a female volunteer, it was written:

> "[…] the answer is that I cannot continue to volunteer for CS because I cannot volunteer under a team leader and/or member of the LT who has committed and admitted two (!) cases of sexual harassment.
> Volunteering for such a team or organisation would mean that I approve of this kind of behaviour but I do not. I do not want to be associated with an organisation that tolerates such behaviour or might even be perceived as supporting it by allowing a member with a record of two incidences of sexual misconduct towards volunteers to continue to share a house with several more volunteers."[50]

The team leader in question led the Ambassador Support Team. According to the resignation letter of one of the volunteers who were sexually harassed, one month after the complaint had been received by the organization, the team leader was even appointed as part of the Leadership Team[51]. Another alleged victim stated that she did not leave a negative reference until 3 months after the incident because she "was warned by one of the LT if [she] ever made a comment in public about anyone in the upper ranks, [she] would be removed from participating as a volunteer."[52] Further statements allege that the negative references left for the team leader were removed by the Leadership Team[53]. After receiving flak from the community and the resignation of many long-term volunteers, the team leader stepped down from his position[54]. His profile was deleted months later.

With regards to sex and the volunteering environment, another resignation letter[55] posted in the Ambassador's Public group contained further allegations:

> "[…] Many members and Ambassadors also believe that it helps someone secure BaseCamp status by returning sexual favors. At least you have the rooms/space set up for it.
>
> I've never been to a non-profit's headquarters where there were rooms specifically for sexual encounters. And it comes with anal beads, mind you. Don't get me wrong... I am a Sex Positive person. But when positions and housing and food and travel are given because of this, then the word volunteer should be changed to another word, meaning the exchange of sex for cash or

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[50] Resignation Letter #15, see Appendix F
[51] Resignation Letter #16, see Appendix F
[52] Resignation Letter #15, see Appendix F
[53] Resignation Letter #19, see Appendix F
[54] Resignation Letter #22, see Appendix F
[55] Resignation Letter #19, see Appendix F

other tangible items. Do you think the American Red Cross has anal beads anywhere within their headquarters? I realize we are not the same, but still."

Fenton made a public reply to dismiss this, the accusations of sexual harassment, and other allegations on nepotism and financial mismanagement, as "factually inaccurate information"[56].

Problems with Trust Mechanisms

CS has several trust mechanisms, such as verification, references and vouching. The concerns addressed here are not issues of how members exploited or tricked the system (which is explored in Chapter 5), but rather, how the trust mechanisms do not work the way that they are supposed to, or how they have been mishandled by the organization in the past.

Among the most controversial is the verification mechanism, which has been continuously touted as the main trust feature, as users of the system are constantly reminded to verify themselves for a safer community. The verification process is as such: the user enters his or her name and physical address into the system and pays a fee via credit card. The organization verifies that the details entered match the name on the credit card, and sends a confirmation code via postcard to the user. The user enters the code into the website, thus confirming that she is able to retrieve mail at the address given to CouchSurfing. The user gets a green tick on her profile picture upon successful verification, and the text "this user has been verified". The verification service was almost the exclusive source of income (99%, according to Casey Fenton at the Paris CouchSurfing conference on October 9th 2011) for the organization, apart from donations until August 2011, date after which donations could not be accepted at all any more by the then for-profit corporation.

Some members of the community have argued that the verification system is overly sold as a trust feature, misguided by the intention to generate income. When changes were implemented to display green ticks on verified user profiles in mid-2009, there were lively discussions in the forums to dispute it, arguing that the move was divisive to the community, and implied that unverified users were less trustworthy even if they were supported by references and vouches.[57] The matter was compounded by claims that the verification process did not actually work as it was advertised. It

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[56] Resignation Letter #19, see Appendix F
[57] "Does dividing members apart create a better world or a better CS?" http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7219&post=3196285, accessed online on 6/3/12

was stated by a former team leader in the Verifications Team that verification could be done using someone else's credit card. In other words, the verification process did not necessarily confirm the identity or actual address of the owner of the profile. It was also admitted that by the team leader that she received a commission of 13 cents from every successful verification process.[58] On top of that, a number of bugs within the system had caused problems with payment, for instance in overcharging the members accidentally, causing extra man hours in refunding the payments.[59] Also, the verification only needs to be done once to obtain the coveted checkmark, and there is no way of knowing how up-to-date the information is and if the user has since moved elsewhere.

CouchSurfing has a Member Dispute and Safety Team (MDST) which role is to mediate disputes and to act upon complaints on deviant behaviour that endangers the community. I have spoken to many members who trust that the organization will handle safety issues in a prompt and professional manner. However, it has been pointed out that the MDST had not been effective in what it does, in at least two separate incidents. The first incident happened in Germany, where a rogue member stole repeatedly from his hosts, deleting his profile and creating new ones when he received negative references. The MDST took 2 months to send out a mass message to warn its members in Germany even though complaints and numerous messages had been received from members of the community, resulting in more thefts happening in the meantime.[60] The second incident happened in Asia, where a member raped a host in Kyoto and continued surfing couches, repeatedly creating new profiles as well. The friend of the victim voiced his dissatisfaction over the reaction of the MDST towards this case, that "they have made it abundantly clear by their follow-ups (or lack thereof) and resounding silence on official channels, that self-preservation, rather than user safety, is their main priority".[61] In this case, the community rallied together to spread

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[58]"verification page redirect!"
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7621&post=4545155#post4561307 accessed online on 6/3/12
[59]Resignation Letter #19, see Appendix F
[60]"How much can we trust CS to put "safety first"?" -
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7621&post=8258526, accessed online on 7/3/12
[61] "Rape, Japan, Internet mobs &Couchsurfing – An Epilogue of sorts" -
http://unknowngenius.com/blog/archives/2012/01/25/rape-japan-internet-mobs-couchsurfing-an-epilogue-of-sorts/ accessed online on 7/3/12

the information on the forum groups, along the itinerary of the perpetrator through Tokyo[62], Kuala Lumpur[63] and Singapore[64].

References are considered to be one of the most important trust mechanisms, and the official stance is that references will not be removed from individual profiles, to ensure a fair reputation system. However, as stated in the section on sexual harassment and other hearsay[65], there have been allegations that there were instances when references were removed without a transparent process.

Other Matters of Concern

Among other matters of concern that surfaced here and there include data privacy, the deletion of accounts without proper procedures, censorship of dissenting voices, the instability of the website[66] etc. The main controversies covered above are enough to provide an idea of the situation of the years when CS was supported mostly by volunteers. Based on the information collected, it does appear that the non-profit was not well-run, saddled with problems of non-communication, exploitation of volunteers and financial mismanagement. There has been no evidence that any of these issues have been resolved by the for-profit corporation. Many of the volunteers resigned out of frustration and anger, some even sadness – which was reflected in the resignation letters, such as the one below:

> "Hey team,
>
> I'm resigning as a CS Amb.
>
> This hasn't been an easy decision. Firstly, I really like the people on the LT/AST - how can't I? They dedicate all their time to a project I deeply love. And this project has introduced me to people who have changed the direction of my life for the better and made me a better person.

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[62]"EMERGENCY COUCH IN TOKYO!" -
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=1192&post=11013454m, accessed online on 7/3/12
[63] "BEWARE OF THIS GUY! - Please
read..." http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=1313&post=11090225, accessed online on 7/3/12
[64] "BEWARE OF THIS GUY! - Please
read..."http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=415&post=11090222 accessed online on 7/3/12
[65] "References and the lack of a dispute resolution process -
http://allthatiswrong.wordpress.com/2010/01/24/a-criticism-of-couchsurfing-and-review-of-alternatives/#csrefs, accessed online on 8/3/12
[66] Resignation Letter #13, see Appendix F

But I have realized lately that I'm not an ambassador for CouchSurfing.org but rather an ambassador for hospitality, transparency, communication, fairness, radical inclusion and living life. CouchSurfing for me represented a collective of people who believed in that. People who believed in respect and equal rights and honour and integrity. People who wanted to make positive change in the world and have fun at the same time. I didn't just want to be a member using a service, I wanted to participate on THAT team.

I don't believe anymore that CouchSurfing is that nor can it ever be that organization that I dreamt it would. The specific incidents are just symptoms. From the mass exodus of the Tech Team in 2007 to the mass exodus of the Global Ambs this year, we have not learnt from our mistakes. And we are all to blame. From the Ambs who basically say "don't worry be happy" to the Brainstormers who are bitter and twisted, and everyone in between. We have failed.

I suspect that some of you are like me. Hoping to stay on as a CS Amb so that you can change things "from the inside". However, I realize now that this is all futile. All I'm doing is being a complicit representative to actions that are against my very nature.

For better or worse, CS is the best hospitality exchange we have right now. I will continue to promote the philosophy of hospitality exchange as a member but I can no longer in good conscience, continue representing this organization as an "ambassador". All I can hope for is something better comes along before it's too late."[67]

Conversion from a Non-Profit to a For-Profit (2011)

On the 24th of August, 2011, users of CouchSurfing were informed about the changing of legal structure of CouchSurfing, from a non-profit to a B-corporation. An excerpt from the global announcement read:

"As of today, CouchSurfing is proud to announce that we are joining the growing ranks of certified B Corporations. What does that mean? As a B (Benefit) Corporation, CouchSurfing will be part of a group of innovative businesses that deliver products and services with a commitment to social and environmental responsibility, transparency, fair work conditions, and doing good for the world."

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[67] Resignation Letter #21, see Appendix F

Forbes.com reported that CouchSurfing was receiving 7.6million in funding from venture capitalists Benchmark Capital and Omidyar Network[68]. For clarity, In the United States, B-corporations are for-profit corporations which have obtained a certification by B-Lab (a non-profit organization) as being socially responsible based on self-declaration and for a fee. B-Corporations are not to be confused with Benefit Corporations, which are a new legal form available in 7 U.S. states at the moment. It was stated in their announcement that CouchSurfing would not change its mission and vision, and that members would never have to pay to host and surf[69]. In July, CouchSurfing hired San Francisco-based PR firm The OutCast Agency (which clients included Facebook and Zynga) in preparation for the announcement. Casey Fenton and Daniel Hoffer were put through intensive media training to relay the message of the conversion to its members[70]. A series of videos was shot to explain the conversion[71]. A detailed announcement was made to active volunteers, and a shorter email for regular members. Casey Fenton then organized a world tour to Istanbul, Montreal, London, Paris and Berlin (and, according to an account, 7 other cities, which were not officially announced as a part of his tour)[72].

Lively debates happening in many forum groups showed diverging views of support, dissent and indifference. These debates can be summed up as trust and distrust towards the ability, benevolence and integrity (as per indicators of organizational trustworthiness of Mayer et al. (1995)) of the restructured organization. Proponents of the change argued that funding would bring improved functionality and accountability as the number of users continues to increase, hence strengthening the ability of the organization – while protests appear to question the benevolence and integrity of the organization. This has to be contextualized against the background of CS in terms of the ideology behind it, and the strong volunteer culture from its early days.

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[68] " Non-Profit CouchSurfing Raises Millions In Funding", http://www.forbes.com/sites/nicoleperlroth/2011/08/24/non-profit-couchsurfing-raises-millions-in-funding/, accessed online on 3/3/12

[69] "A New Era for CouchSurfing" http://www.couchsurfing.org/news/article/144, accessed online on 27/7/12

[70] "Couchsurfing Dilemma: Going for Profit", http://www.inc.com/magazine/201206/issie-lapowsky/couchsurfing-new-profit-model.html, accessed online on 28/7/12

[71] Videos were posted here: http://www.couchsurfing.org/bcorp/, accessed online on 28/7/12

[72] "Couchsurfing Dilemma: Going for Profit", http://www.inc.com/magazine/201206/issie-lapowsky/couchsurfing-new-profit-model.html, accessed online on 28/7/12

As the main function of the website is to facilitate free hospitality exchange, the anti-capitalist sentiment was strong. Many of the debates can be abstracted to arguments for and against capitalism, and the differing views influenced the users' judgment of the integrity and benevolence of the organization. For example, a common complaint was that the original founders of the system had "sold out" CouchSurfing, leading to commodification of its member base and subjecting the community to future company decisions that would be based on profit-making, instead of goodwill and altruism. An equally common defense was that CouchSurfing needed resources to continue growing, and founders of the company should be compensated for their work.

Community backlash

The conversion provoked strong reactions from members and volunteers of who contributed donations, time and energy to build the system. As mentioned in the earlier section, many volunteers had worked to contribute in terms of building the infrastructure, translation, communication, conflict resolution and other areas. Another layer of volunteering was by "ambassadors" of various types (city, country, global, nomadic, family etc.) who kept the community vibrant by organizing events and welcoming new members; and of course, hosts who provided free hospitality that range from accommodation, food, city tours etc. As exemplified by a strong expression from a user who referred to the incident as "a hippie-like scam"[73], many felt that their contributions were now aiding the profit-making of a corporation, which CouchSurfingInternational was originally not. This came after scrutiny over CouchSurfing International's financial reports by some users who expressed concern about expenditure and governance within the organization, even before it changed its legal structure[74].

In response to CouchSurfing International's transition to being a for-profit corporation, there was a wave of protests, most notably from a forum group that called itself "We are against CS becoming a for-profit corporation"[75]. By July 2012, it had about 3500 members, and was a hotbed for smaller movements and crowdsourcing

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[73]http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=10071392, post removed as of 17/8/12
[74]" 2010 independent audit of CS finances",
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7621&post=9830240, accessed online on 17/8/12
[75] "We are against CS becoming a for-profit corporation" CS Group -
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group.html?gid=45507, accessed on 17/8/12

such as spreading information regarding the conversion[76], promoting a profile picture generator[77] (which puts a red banner across the user's profile picture, with text such as "Sold", "Not for sale", "Property of CorpSurfing" etc., see Figure 6.1), hosting strikes or migration to other networks[78], etc. Other hospitality exchange networks (such as BeWelcome and Hospitality Club) were touted as alternatives. Some users had even started to organize the building of an application to ease migration, though it was recognized that this would be a difficult endeavour and might be illegal[79].

Figure 6-1 Modified avatar in protest against CouchSurfing's conversion

Apart from news announcements on the website, most of the firefighting efforts seemed to be spearheaded by Casey Fenton, who dedicated posts on his blog to explain the organization's evolution from its beginning[80], justify the choice of structure[81], and acknowledge the positive and critical responses from the community[82]. Among other efforts by Fenton was to engage the community include arranging Skype calls with some users[83] and organizing a tour to Montreal, Istanbul, London, Paris and Berlin to meet local Couchsurfers face-to-face[84]. On the ground, reactions were varied

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[76] " CS dissidents FAQ"http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=10039182, accessed on 17/8/12

[77] http://www.3rdw.net/cs/pimpup/, accessed on 3/3/12

[78] "Hosting strike!!!!!" http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=10004025, accessed on 17/8/12

[79] "automate migration of profile to another network"http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=9997069, accessed on 17/8/12

[80] "Always evolving" http://blog.couchsurfing.org/casey/2011/08/couchsurfing-always-evolving/, accessed on 3/3/12

[81] "Choosing the right structure" http://blog.couchsurfing.org/casey/2011/09/choosing-the-right-structure/ accessed on 3/3/12

[82] "Thanks for all your feedback" http://blog.couchsurfing.org/casey/2011/09/thanks-for-all-of-your-feedback/ accessed on 3/3/12

[83] "Casey wants to talk to me" http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=9967977, accessed on 3/3/12 http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=9979542#post10013207

[84] "CS Conference Dates" http://blog.couchsurfing.org/casey/2011/09/cs-conference-dates/, accessed on 3/3/12

and depended on the locality. According to Fenton, the reactions from members in Montreal, Istanbul and London were quite positive, whereas in Paris, "it crossed people's ideologies big time". In Berlin, reactions were strongly mixed and consisted of opinions of both extremes. Amidst these developments, I observed that majority of the users reacted towards the news with indifference, as long as CouchSurfing International continues to provide its services for free. Online, outside of a handful of political-minded forum groups on CouchSurfing.org, discussions on location-based groups tended to be short-lived and quickly drowned out by other threads requesting travel tips, organizing events, etc.

Couchsurfing Conversion Issues

The story of the CouchSurfing conversion is narrated by some as a 5-year-long struggle with the Internal Revenue Service, wherein Casey Fenton and Dan Hoffer "pleaded" with the IRS to grant CouchSurfing International an official non-profit, 501(c)3 status[85]. The IRS declined their application because it did not see the facilitation of cultural exchange as a charitable act. With the rise of for-profit competitors such as AirBnB, CouchSurfing had no choice but to change its legal structure in order to survive. It is therefore interesting to read from another report (written several months later) that Dan Hoffer had intended to turn CouchSurfing International into a for-profit from the very beginning. In a talk in the Graduate School of Business in Stanford University, Hoffer stated that he and Fenton had wrote up "a contract between the two of them that detailed what would happen if CouchSurfing were to ever go for-profit, as he suspected it one day would"[86].

Exhibit 6.2 is a passage that summarizes the conversion issues of CouchSurfing, from a non-profit to a profit-making corporation, as seen by a group of community members. This passage has been translated into 3 different languages (French, Spanish and Italian) on its wiki page, which has been accessed more than 1,400 times at the time of writing. It has also been posted in many of the forum groups. As the article is written clearly and concisely, there is no point in reinventing the wheel; therefore I have included the article ad verbatim. From a main contributor

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[85] "CouchSurfing Dilemma: Going for Profit", http://www.inc.com/magazine/201206/issie-lapowsky/couchsurfing-new-profit-model.html, accessed online at 1/3/2013
[86] "Couchsurfing Co-founder and former CEO Daniel Hoffer Discusses Leadership at the Stanford GSB", http://www.thedishdaily.com/news/2013/01/14/couchsurfing-co-founder-and-former-ceo-daniel-hoffer-discusses-leadership-stanford accesssed online at 1/3/2013

of the article, I obtained the references to the claims, and verified them. Some elaborations on the statements were given via further communication, and are listed below the article, together with the references.

CouchSurfing "conversion" issues

"The issues with the "conversion" of CouchSurfing to a for-profit corporation are many and complex. Many members keep asking what the problem is, often accompanied by the remark "But for me, nothing has changed".

Here is an attempt to explain in a simplified and hopefully easily understandable way what to the best of my knowledge happened, with a summary of the issues at the end:

CouchSurfing was founded as a non-profit organization in the U.S. state of New Hampshire in 2003.

Under repeated assurances by CS management that CS would always remain non-profit, volunteers, dedicated members and donors helped build and rebuild CS after Casey Fenton accidentally deleted the database in 2006 [1], gave up and walked away.

In 2010, CS was notified by the U.S. tax authorities (IRS) that it would be denied the 501c3 charity status for which it had applied because the way in which CS operated was viewed as social rather than charitable in nature (and for a number of other reasons).

At that stage, CS had to change its status. It could have chosen another non-profit type, such as 501c7 for the social and recreational organization which the IRS said it was, or go for-profit. Although CS had always pledged to remain non-profit, it decided to break that pledge and go for-profit. [2]

To prepare this "conversion", the chairman of CouchSurfing, Dan Hoffer, had already been working as an "Entrepreneur In Residence" at the venture capital firm Benchmark Capital months before the IRS denial was officially notified. [3]

The bylaws of CS and the law stipulate that upon dissolution the assets of the non-profit organization had to be distributed to a charity or to the government.

CouchSurfing petitioned a New Hampshire court for authorization to buy the assets itself, telling the court that nobody else could receive the assets and that there were no interested parties to be notified of the plan to sell CouchSurfing [4]. At the same, time CouchSurfing volunteers were told only that changes were coming, but not that CouchSurfing would be sold [5]. Members and donors were told nothing. This lack of information deprived these stakeholders of their legal right to oppose the petition.

Based on a valuation commissioned and paid for by CouchSurfing, the non-profit assets were valued at only about $600,000, less than 1/3 of annual revenue [6].

The founders of CouchSurfing set up a new company under the name "Better World

Through Travel, Inc." (BWTT) [7] in Delaware (a famous tax haven [8]) which bought the CouchSurfing assets for a fraction of the actual value.

The proceeds of the sale went to a New Hampshire grant fund rather than to the CouchSurfing community which had created the assets in large parts.

The majority shareholders of BWTT, Casey Fenton and Dan Hoffer, issued shares to themselves and sold a minority share of the supposed $600,000 assets for $7,600,000 to two capital venture firms, Benchmark Capital and Omidyar Network. This puts the value of Casey Fenton's and Dan Hoffer's share at more than $7,600,000, most likely at more than $15 million [9].

Initially they announced that CouchSurfing had been converted to a Benefit Corporation, which was then corrected to "B-Corporation". The right to carry the "B-Corp" label was obtained by submitting false information about the dissolved non-profit organization to B-Lab, the organization which hands out the label for a fee, and by using that label for the just created profit corporation under the false name "CouchSurfing International" (the real name being "Better World Through Travel, Inc.") [10].

CouchSurfing has been misrepresenting the nature of the business as "half-way between a non-profit and a for-profit" when in fact the legal form is a conventional for-profit C-Corporation (like Coca Cola or Microsoft) [11]. The future of CouchSurfing is now uncertain because it will have to go public in the not too distant future [12] in order to repay the venture capital with a profit and to allow employees to exercise their stock options. Nobody knows who will then be the new shareholders and what their plans for CouchSurfing will be.

So, in summary, there are serious issues with the dishonest way in which CS, against repeated assurances that this could and would never happen, has been secretly privatized for the personal enrichment of a few when other alternatives existed, with how this has been justified, with the impact this has on the CouchSurfing community which in large part built what is now being taken away from it, and with how the nature of the new owner of the website and of our data has been misrepresented as a kind of non-profit when legally it is nothing but a conventional profit corporation illegitimately parading a B-Lab label.

The moral issues with the above should be obvious. The legal issues are currently being investigated [13]. The first consequence of this investigation is expected to be the withdrawal of the B-Corp certification. Other consequences could include the criminal prosecution of key actors in the above "conversion", its reversal, or the withdrawal of the investors.

Notes added by researcher:
[1] It is not apparent if Casey Fenton actually deleted the database, as there are differing accounts – in the letter by Fenton he mentioned that it was the fault of the

hired database administrators; whereas it was speculated somewhere else that Fenton had deleted the database[87].

[2]This was addressed as a "myth" in a newsletter to CouchSurfing members. According to the newsletter,"After our final rejection for 501c3 at the federal level, the government of the state that we were registered in would no longer allow us to operate as a non-profit. Our status up until our conversion was an unusually drawn out part of the normal process that US non-profits go through while registering at the federal level, not an accepted permanent state for an organization."[88] *To this, my correspondent replied, "That statement by CS is the myth, and lie: CouchSurfing could perfectly have continued as a different non-profit type, without tax exemption, such as 501c7. Nobody forced CouchSurfing to sell community assets to a non-profit corporation".*

[3] It is verified through multiple sources (from the official site of Benchmark Capital or Dan Hoffer's LinkedIn profile, etc.) that Dan Hoffer was a former Entrepreneur In Residence at Benchmark Capital. However, the statement that Dan Hoffer had done that in preparation for the conversion remains an assertion.

[4] It was stated in the Order on Notice by the state of New Hampshire that CouchSurfing International sought a cy pres *petition to allow the assets of the non-profit to be transferred to a for-profit organization, and named no interested parties. The court ordered a notice to be published in a newspaper in the state for 3 weeks, of the plans to transfer the assets of CouchSurfing International to a for-profit corporation of the same name, in order to allow interested parties to be notified and heard*[89].

[5] A team newsletter for volunteers, not published to the regular members, announced that CouchSurfing had failed to obtain the 501c3 charity status. Quoted from the newsletter, Casey Fenton stated that: "Unfortunately, I can't give you more details right now. We are still in the middle of the legal process necessary to create a new structure for the CouchSurfing organization. What I can tell you right now are the commitments we're making. First, our community's Vision will always be our organization's first priority. Second, surfing and hosting will continue to be free. Third, we will always be focused on serving our members." [90]

[6]More information can be found in the CouchSurfing Knowledge Base, NPO Privatization section and CouchSurfing's financial statements with independent auditors' report (2010)[91]

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[87]CouchSurfing didn't crash" - http://www.opencouchsurfing.org/2007/08/01/couchsurfing-didnt-crash/ accessed online on 5/3/12

[88] "Myths and Facts: CouchSurfing's conversion to a B Corp" http://www.couchsurfing.org/news/article/149, accessed online on 5/3/12

[89]http://sites.google.com/site/cskbase/npo-privatization/CouchSurfingNHprivatizationpetition_orderonnotice.pdf?attredirects=0 accessed on 9/3/12

[90] "probable switch to for-profit CS: Team newsletter" http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7621&post=8603025 accessed online on 9/3/12

[91] CS Knowledge Base, http://sites.google.com/site/cskbase/npo-privatization, and http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbnxjc2tiYXNlfGd4OjQ4OThmYWNmZTc1NzkkzNTU&pli=1, accessed online on

[7] A PDF file was sent to me, of a screen capture of a Business Entity Detail from the official website of the California Secretary of State. The data had the entity name "BETTER WORLD THROUGH TRAVEL, INC", entity number "C3387376", agent for Service of Process was "Daniel Hoffer". The screen capture was dated 8/11/11. However, when I entered the entity number C3387376 into the official site to check the name on 5/3/12, the entity name was "COUCHSURFING INTERNATIONAL, INC" instead. The veracity of the existence of Better World Through Travel, Inc is undisputed because it was announced by Casey Fenton during his tour in Paris, and is confirmed by several reports by attendees of the conference[92]. Apparently the name of the Company was changed to CouchSurfing International Inc. later.

[8] Source: The Guardian (1 November 2009) - "Obama faces criticism as US state tops secrecy table - Delaware named as world's most secret financial location"[93]

[9] Through private communication: "This statement is based on the communication by CS that the $7.6 million by the Venture Capital firms represented a minor part of the shares, which leaves the majority to Fenton and Hoffer, as Fenton confirmed in Paris in October 2011. If the "minor" share, which CS refuses to disclose in more detail, is 25%, then the total value of the company is $30 million, and a majority share more than $15 million."

[10] About CouchSurfing International's profile in the B Labs website[94], through private communication: "They may have changed the name of the company to 'CouchSurfing International' after dissolving the non-profit organization of the same name. But the statement holds true for what happened at the time of the privatization of the assets. The data shown at the above link has been there since August 2011. They only changed the year of evaluation from "2010" to "2011" recently, without updating the data."

[11] This I had clarified with Casey Fenton during his conference in Berlin – a B-Corp was a certification by B-Labs and not a legal status like Benefit Corporation, and the organization was indeed a normal C Corporation. It is conceivable that some people may be misled by the announcement that Couchsurfing was now a "B (Benefit) Corporation".

[12] This was mentioned by Dan Hoffer in an interview with El Pais[95], and also mentioned by Casey Fenton in the Paris conference.

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[92] Private communication with contributor of the article, confirmed by the following two reports, both accessed on 5/3/12 - "Review: Paris CS conference with Casey, Oct. 8-9" - http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=10397927
"Review: CS Conference and Meeting with Casey in Paris, Oct 8-10 2011"
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=10405221
[93] "Obama faces criticism as US state tops secrecy table"
http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2009/nov/01/delaware-first-choice-tax-haven, accessed online on 5/3/12
[94]CouchSurfing International B-Corp Profile Page
http://www.bcorporation.net/index.cfm/fuseaction/company.report/ID/5e086197-f44e-4448-9519-5e35d5bde1e2 accessed online on 6/3/12
[95] "El jefe de CouchSurfing asegura que su objetivo es salir a Bolsa" -
http://elpais.com/diario/2011/09/13/radiotv/1315864802_850215.htmlaccessed online on 9/3/12

Exhibit 6-2 CouchSurfing "conversion" issues –from Couchwiki.org[96] with notes

The conversion of CouchSurfing from a non-profit to a for-profit corporation is an interesting case, and provoked many discussions online. Through writing this historical account of CouchSurfing, it appears that there have been multiple trust violations over the years, with regards to mistreatment of the volunteers within the community, problems of governance, member safety and other issues. Therefore some questions arise: Why did some people feel deep distrust towards the organization, and some not? Why, after a number of trust violations, did the number of members continue to rise, and why was there still a constant stream of volunteers (be it hosts, Ambassadors or Community Builders)? I analyze the online discussions sparked by the conversion to bring forth some answers to the questions.

To contextualize the question of trust, we first need to understand that there are a number of dimensions to look at. There is the general community (i.e. Couchsurfers), the organization that runs the website (CouchSurfing International, Inc), and the website itself that serves as the platform that facilitates the interactions of Couchsurfers (CouchSurfing.org). Hospitality exchange based on goodwill relies on all of these dimensions to provide the users with tools to make trusting decisions. The website provides technological affordances and constraints that support the social structure (formed based on norms and values of the community). The organizational policies direct the website in matters of importance such as the expansion of member base, data privacy, site features etc. All of these form the context of trust that Couchsurfing is situated in.

Why did some users lose trust in the organization after the conversion?

By leaving its non-profit roots, the CouchSurfing website and its member base were now tools for generating profit, albeit in a socially responsible manner (as promised by the organization). By the commodification of free hospitality, there was a dissonance in ideology, between a community-driven gift economy and a capitalistic philosophy that focuses on growth and profit. This dissonance was precisely the cause

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[96]http://couchwiki.org/en/CouchSurfing_conversion_issues accessed online on 1/3/12

of the "revolt" by concerned members of the community. For these members, approved values, attitudes and behaviour within the subculture were undermined by the organization, which plays a major role in shaping the platform that supports the community. The current and projected exponential growth of the member base was bringing CouchSurfing to the masses, to people who did not necessarily possess the cosmopolitan disposition, valuing cultural exchange and goodwill above free accommodation. On top of that, there was also a sense of injustice over the manner of which the volunteer contributions were glossed over or played down.[97]

If we view the organization as an actor (as per Actor Network Theory), the situation pointed to the depletion of this actor's subcultural capital. From being a volunteer-powered initiative with volunteers from all over the world, it was now a for-profit corporation in America bound by local regulations, with links to the highly profitable SNS, Facebook. Some community members had pointed out that some employees did not even have a profile on CouchSurfing.org, suggesting that they were not familiar with the norms and ideals of the CouchSurfing community. As mentioned before, the integrity and benevolence of the organization were questioned because of the capitalistic fundamentals of a corporation, while the original mission of CouchSurfingwas about making the world a better place. The act of commercializing the "project", of which many volunteers contributed to, was perceived as the ultimate act of freeloading –and freeloading was one of the biggest taboos within the CouchSurfing community, directly contradicting its metanarrative of reflexive cosmopolitanism.

> "I don't know how many people like me there are, but if there are many, then CS has serious problems ahead.
>
> I purely host. I have a nice place in a seasonal resort where hosts are sparse and there aren't a ton of surfers. When I travel I would not consider surfing, since I don't travel alone and have the means to (and prefer to) have the flexibility, privacy and comforts of a hotel.
>
> I am very disappointed and angry about CS going to for-profit. Why should someone be making money off of me, when I could easily make it myself? It's not apples and apples, but I could easily rent my whole place out all summer at $1500 a week as many of my neighbors do.

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[97]In a half hour presentation about CouchSurfing history in Casey Fenton's post-conversion world tour (in Berlin, which I attended), the database crash of 2006 and the following volunteer efforts were ostensibly omitted. The history narrated mainly focused on Fenton's revelation in Egypt and Iceland leading to the founding of the system, and described the CouchSurfing collectives over the years.

I joined and hosted because I love travel and interesting people. I really thought that CS was a special place that lived above commercialism. Now I feel like that is gone and will probably pull the plug after I return from Europe in a few weeks. It's a shame. I have made deep friendships with some of my surfers. I always made sure that everyone is welcomed warmly, fed well and offered what they need.

The new CS main page won't even let people get any information on CS without signing up! What does this say about CS and its priorities? For me it seems it's all about numbers now. I am not a number. I am a good Host, the single most important element in the CS equation.

And I am leaving."[98]

The sentiments above of a disenfranchised host encapsulated the main trust issues: he felt that his free hospitality was being taken advantage of by the organization, and that CouchSurfing had lost credibility as "a special place that lived above commercialism". The new CouchSurfing website design only gave information to people who were already signed up, and the lack of openness irked him. It is important to also point out here, that CouchSurfing International violated the trust of the community by breaking its pledge to always remain non-profit, and that management sold the assets to itself under the questionable circumstances described in the "conversion issues" wiki document. After the conversion, many documents available from before, like financial information or statistics regarding the users were taken down. While the organization grappled with its impression management, notably through Casey Fenton's PR efforts online and offline, many of the users were already disillusioned, making the leap of faith very difficult.

Why did majority of the users still support CouchSurfing?

Having made a point about users losing their trust in the system, another question arises: why did people still use, and support, CouchSurfing? A large number of users of Couchsurfingwere ambivalent about the transition. Post-conversion, I spoke to many CouchSurfers, and found that a large majority either did not know, or did not care about the conversion. Although the conversion of legal status alarmed some segments of the CouchSurfing community, most others were simply not aware or interested in political issues pertaining to the CouchSurfing community. Only a

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[98]"Regardless to the capitalist drama, the hard facts: CS don't work anymore"
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7621&post=10005068#post10012171 accessed on 31/7/12

small minority of users kept tabs on these issues, and had been doing so since earlier controversies during the volunteer-driven era. These discussions were focused mainly in only a few politically charged forums. Not many regular members frequented forums other than the location-based forums (e.g. the Singapore group) where travel tips are solicited, if they visited the forums at all. These members were detached from the happenings, and received their news through newsletters sent out by the organization.

Impression management at a company-level tried to persuade its stakeholders that core values remain unchanged. The communication by the organization, carefully strategized by PR consultants, was mostly quite useful in convincing the general CouchSurfing population that the conversion was the best path forward. Many users also viewed the organization and the community as one. This is understandable, as community efforts formed a large part of the building of CouchSurfing.org; the trust towards the community transferred to the organization. Cognitive dissonance made it difficult for people to accept that the organization behind the CouchSurfing Project (that was perceived to serve higher purposes of connecting people, without commercial transactions) had sold out the project – hence it was easier for them to believe that it was done with benevolent intentions. While some members got completely disillusioned when they went into the details of the controversies of the past, others simply refused to accept it and continued to trust in the organization.

From another angle, users had differing interpretations of what CouchSurfing was. To some it was a community, created by the community for the community. To others it was a service, and there was nothing wrong to monetize a service. A debate on one of the forum groups illustrates this beautifully[99]. The different views were often based on one's experience and engagement within the system – experienced users tend to view CouchSurfing as a community, and new users as a service (Lauterbach et al., 2008). CouchSurfing had undergone exponential growth within the past few years, therefore there were more new users than experienced ones.

Levels of uncertainty and vulnerability were differently experienced, based on different views of what CouchSurfing was. Community members perceived that their contributions were engulfed by the newly-formed corporation, and they were wary about future directions. From the service users' perspective, although there was

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[99] "What's the difference?" http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=10131127 accessed on 31/7/12

uncertainty that the organization might turn back on its promise of keeping the service free, the leap of faith was much easier, as it could be deduced that other means of monetization was more probable than antagonizing the users. Considering that running CouchSurfing as a business was likely to improve the service of the website and accountability of the organization, it is not surprising that the trustworthiness of CS increased for some users. Also, the debates have to be situated within larger philosophical debates about the pros and cons of capitalism. For each member who was engaged in passionate debate, there were many others who simply did not care.

What about those who did know *and* care about the issue? Although there were hosts who migrated to other platforms, it turns out that many others continued using the platform, for practical reasons. It is difficult to extricate oneself from the website, assuming that one is still interested in engaging in CouchSurfing activities. This holds true especially for active members of the community, who were locked into the website after years of accumulating friend links, references, etc. This is apparent through this quote from a discussion on building an application to automate migration from CouchSurfing to other hospex sites:

> "[…] When it comes to SURF a couch (and here I'm pretending to ignore the dating side of CS), and consequently -and more important yet- when it comes to accept a request, most of us don't care so much about the great members of this awesome brotherhood as we care about our future host or guest references. Who's he? What's his CS story? Who's backing him up? At least that's what my experience (and my CS contacts) has taught to me: that, better than the profile description -so totally subjective, so "fakeable"- we read the references, we scan for any negative, we check for friends... Mostly any active member in this community (and I assume you guys posting here are, same as me, quite active) would feel an irreparable loss if, when migrating, we can't retrieve our references. We've worked hard to build a reputation, a nice record, and we'll think it twice before migrating to a new site if we can't drag that record along with us. A new profile we can build in a couple of hours, perhaps a couple of days. But the references and links? No way! […]"[100]

And, at the end of the day, for members who did not agree with the direction that CouchSurfing was going, it was still recognized that the CouchSurfing website continued to provide a valuable service to its members. It is the largest hospitality exchange network in the world, with no viable competition as of yet in terms of the

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[100] "automate migration of profile to another network",
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=9997069#post10118411 accessed on 29/7/12

size of member base, activity level or pervasiveness. As explained by one user on the forums,

> "As much as I have no interest in helping other people get rich without being compensated, creating an event or hosting a traveler is simply using a tool to selfishly enrich my life and my social interactions. Regardless of how ethical or unethical the behaviour of CS management has been (and though I hate the thought, I don't see many ways left to look at what happened as other than deceit, fraud, and theft), the site itself has and so far continues to enable such enrichment. To that extent, I have no objection to using its features for my purposes.
>
> I'm no longer putting any effort into improving the site or promoting CS as a fairly selfless organization, but clearly, there's still value here for the members. If there isn't, why are any of us still here?"[101]

<div align="center">Beyond the Conversion (2012 – time of writing)</div>

Beyond the conversion, the organization, community and website of CouchSurfing went through a series of rapid changes. With the injection of capital, CouchSurfing International rearranged its organizational structure and altered the platform to enable and support the growth of its member base. The rate of changes subjected the community to a high level of volatility in aspects such as the usability of the website and user involvement in CouchSurfing activities. For the research, documentation of these changes is tantamount to chasing a moving target. In this section, I record the development of events and the implications on trust-building processes, up to February 2013.

<div align="center">*Organizational Restructure*</div>

In April 2012, CouchSurfing International hired a new CEO, Tony Espinoza[102]. In May 2012, a letter written by Dan Hoffer was circulated in the forums, notifying the community of changes to the Community Builders program:

> "Over the years, the teams of Community Builders (formerly called "volunteers") that work with us have become bloated. Hundreds of people applied - many for the prestige associated with volunteering for us - and then may have become too busy to contribute substantial hours on an ongoing basis. As a result, we have a large and fragmented base spread across 7 teams that we are now going to clean up and optimize by eliminating 4 of the 7 teams over

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[101] "upcoming changes …?"
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=12023706#post12071820, accessed on 29/7/12
[102] "Announcing our new CEO" http://www.couchsurfing.org/news/article/209, accessed on 29/7/12

the next couple months, and shrinking the number of Community Builders in the remaining teams down to fewer than twenty.[103]

The teams that would be closed were Locations Team, Groups Management Team, Event Message Approval Team, and the Verifications Team. The Translations Team, Contact Us Questions (CUQ) Team and Bug Submission Team would be significantly shrunk. It was later explained in the CouchSurfing blog that the website was being revamped to "evolve to a point where as much as possible of that work is done through technology, rather than by members and teams", and that smaller teams would be more conducive to communication and relationship-building. The CouchSurfing Team expressed that they were "incredibly grateful" to Community Builders of the past[104].

Towards the end of June 2012, Casey Fenton wrote a letter to the community explaining that he, together with Daniel Hoffer, would cease to operate the company, leaving the leadership to the new CEO Tony Espinoza, who was installed a few months before (in April 2012).

> "[…] from here on out Dan and I are stepping back from the day-to-day tasks involved in operating the company. We'll still be very much involved, on a strategic level, in our roles as members of the Board of Directors. But it's time for us to get some new ideas out into the world. For many years, we've put in countless hours of overtime building CouchSurfing. Now that it's launched, we're both looking forward to being creative once again. There are many ways to change the world, and we each have more projects that we'd like to see come to life."[105]

It was mentioned by Fenton that one of his projects would be CERI, the CouchSurfing Cultural Exchange Research Institute that would focus on research on "the nature of trust, generosity, and friendship" that help in spreading "intercultural understanding and appreciation of diversity".

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[103] "upcoming changes …? http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=12023706#post12071820, accessed on 29/7/12

[104] "Changes within the Community Builders Program" http://blog.couchsurfing.org/changes-within-the-community-builders-program, accessed on 30/7/12

[105] "A letter from Casey", https://www.couchsurfing.org/news/article/219, accessed on 28/6/12

Revenue Model

In August 2012, CouchSurfing announced that it had new investors onboard, bringing in another 15 million dollars in funding[106].At this point, it was still unclear what the revenue model was. Nonetheless, Tony Espinoza, the CEO, stated that CouchSurfing was "not planning to do something like putting advertising up, or anything else that takes away from the experience or damages the community"[107].In a live webcast addressing the community, held a few months later on December 20, 2012, Espinoza repeatedly emphasized that the company did not have a revenue model:

> "I just want to say again, I know it's really hard to imagine that the investors are fully onboard, and we don't have a plan about revenue. But it's true. [laughs] We just don't. It's not what we're focused on. And there's just such a huge belief that this thing is world changing, that that's the company that these guys want to invest in and be part of."[108]

However, a video interview with Espinoza recorded during a conference a month earlier (PhoCusWright Conference, held in Arizona, US)in November 2012 shows contradictory statements. In the interview with Travel Mole TV, an online community for the travel and tourism industry, Espinoza described CouchSurfing's revenue model in detail (See Exhibit 6.3). Although it is stressed again that CouchSurfing will not generate money through advertising, it is clear that there is a revenue-generating plan in place. This takes the shape of a "premium membership" through which CouchSurfers would obtain travel discounts, and through which travel service providers could promote their products.

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[106] "CouchSurfing raises $15 million to improve our website and mobile apps!", http://www.couchsurfing.org/news/cs-organization/couchsurfing-raises-15-million-to-improve-our-website-and-mobile-apps/ accessed on 25/1/13

[107] "What does more funding mean for CouchSurfing? — A conversation with CEO Tony Espinoza", http://www.couchsurfing.org/news/cs-organization/what-does-more-funding-mean-for-couchsurfing-a-conversation-with-ceo-tony-espinoza/ accessed on 26/1/13

[108]"Couchsurfing Webcast - Dec 20th" (at 50:55 of the video), http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/27883310accessed on 26/1/13

CouchSurfing's CEO discusses Revenue Model[109]

Interviewer: What are the business to business opportunities and model that CouchSurfing offers for travel agencies, tour operators, online travel agencies, travel suppliers even?

Espinoza: Great question. I get asked that question all the time – how do you make money? The core of what we do is to provide incredibly engaging experiences, travel's engaging, travellers are engaging, we connect them together. In the new service that we're launching today, we're connecting not just travellers with others or experiences, but also connecting travellers with all the different things that they need. That is planning a trip, booking a trip, a tour, any of the stuff that they need, all the way down to food and beverages, venues, etc. And, so, what drives CouchSurfing is a very deeply engaged, passionate group of folks that are using the site at the level – they trust recommendations that come from the site. The way we make money currently is through a premium service, a huge percentage of members actually sign up and pay to become a CouchSurfer. And what we're doing at this point with partners is to create as many packages of value for those members as we can, across all the spectrum of the supply chain around travel, which is to create unique deals and special offers for CouchSurfers.

I: So if I'm a tour operator or travel agency, how – is there a way that I can take advantage of your content on my website, and then have these people, like my clients, consumer clients, take advantage of this by booking the air and other travel through me, the travel agent, or tour operator?

E: So the way our experience is structured, both in mobile and online is for Couchsurfers to use the site as their guide books for where they're going to go, how they're going to go. The new service includes things like an itinerary, and the ability to plan the entire trip. So they're at the decision point within the service. The way we integrate with partners is to provide the best options for them, at that point. To members, we provide even better opportunities to save money or to get higher quality experiences there. So a lot of the experiences will be reaching the five million deeply engaged users we have on the site with your services, with your offers, or whatever value that is that you provide, for us to be able to put those in front of people at the right time to take advantage of them.

I: Are you referring to a sponsorship advertising opportunity?

E: Not advertising, this is actually through the premium membership. This is being included in the benefits of being a member, and being provided through the service at the right time, so that when people go to book, people go to find a place to go eat, they're looking at the options that are relevant based on their membership.

I: Based on that location where they are.

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[109]Transcription begins at 4:24, video accessed at
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=OkyMW7S9RWg#t=264son 26/1/13

> E: That's right, based on where they are.
>
> I: So, places to eat, what else?
>
> E: The entire spectrum of travel. People use the site to plan a trip, they use it to manage their itinerary, and partnerships around that that we're working on [unclear]. They book their travel, they book cars, they rent different types of gear they might need for different trips, they buy gear for certain trips. When they're there they're looking for attractions, they're looking to eat, to drink, they're looking for social experiences, cultural experiences, tours, that whole range there. All the way to travel insurance. So, there really isn't anything that wouldn't be relevant to this membership. Anything that involves travel, this is a community of passionate travelers, they are lifelong travelers, that are looking for diverse experiences, and they love being Couchsurfers.

Exhibit 6-3 CouchSurfing's CEO discusses Revenue Model

Terms of Use

In September 2012, CouchSurfing updated its Terms of Use (TOU), which immediately drew a lot of flak from the community. Amidst intense discussions held in many forum threads[110], some European CouchSurfers had mobilized themselves to complain to data protection authorities within their countries and the U.S. Federal Trade Commission[111]. The movement succeeded in prompting a press release issued by the German Federal Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information, deeming the changes to be "unacceptable" and inadmissible under German and European data protection law. As stated in the press statement,

> "Under the new Terms of Use, by uploading contents such as news, photos and personal data, the members grant the company CouchSurfing a full and irrevocable license to a quasi unlimited use of those contents. Moreover, in the Privacy Policy, the company reserves the right to share data with third parties and to change the Terms of Use and the Privacy Policy at any time, without having to provide specific notice to the members about any changes."

The overly broad claim by CouchSurfing over its member content and data was an issue raised by many (see Section 5.3 in Exhibit 6.4).This is compounded by the

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[110] Some examples: (1)"new terms of use in effect - "More information" blog post",
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=13260474 accessed on 28/1/13
(2)"EU-US Safe Harbor& delay of effective date",
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=13189771, accessed on 28/1/13
(3) "Regarding update Privacy Policy, Terms of Use and EU law",
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=13062093, accessed on 28/1/13
[111] "Europeans and others: Here's How We Can Fight the ToU More Effectively"
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=13155452

fact that CouchSurfing stores all the member data permanently, even data that had been "deleted" by its owner. In its sole discretion, CouchSurfing International could edit, remove or delete any member content, as well as deactivate or delete any member account. Exhibit 6.4 shows parts of the new TOU, excerpted by a community member who was urging other members to sign a petition protesting against it[112]. The petition gained 5,566 signatures[113].

<u>Excerpts from new "Terms of Use"</u>

We reserve the right to make changes or modifications to these Terms, or any policy or guideline of our Services, at any time and in our sole discretion. In the event of any conflict between these Terms and any other policy or guideline of our Services, these Terms will govern. Any changes or modifications will be effective immediately upon posting the revisions on our Services, and you waive any right you may have to receive specific notice of such changes or modifications. Your continued use of our Services following the posting of changes or modifications will constitute your acceptance of such changes or modifications. Accordingly, you should frequently review these Terms and applicable policies and guidelines to understand the terms and conditions that apply to your use of the Services.

1. ... You agree to ... (b) provide accurate, truthful, current and complete information when creating an account; (c) maintain and promptly update your account information;...and (f) take responsibility for all activities that occur under your account and accept all risks of any authorized or unauthorized access.
...
5.1 ...we may, in our sole discretion, edit, remove or delete any Member Content without notice.
...
5.3 ... If you post Member Content to our Services, you hereby grant us a perpetual, worldwide, irrevocable, non-exclusive, royalty-free and fully sublicensable license to use, reproduce, display, perform, adapt, modify, create derivative works from, distribute, have distributed and promote such Member Content in any form, in all media now known or hereinafter created and for any purpose, including without limitation the right to use your name, likeness, voice or identity. You represent and warrant that ... (b) the Member Content is accurate and not misleading...
...
13. We may, in our discretion and without liability to you, with or without cause ..., with or without prior notice and at any time: (a) terminate your access to our Services, (b) deactivate or delete your account and all related information and files in such account and/or (c) bar your access to any of such files or Services.
...

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[112]"Petition aganist the new ToU",
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7161&post=13156198, accessed on 24/1/13
[113]"For a strong Community behind CouchSurfing",
http://www.avaaz.org/en/petition/For_a_strong_Community_behind_CouchSurfing/ accessed on 24/1/13

16.2. We do not represent or warrant that ... (c) any information that you may obtain through our services will be accurate or reliable; ... (e) any information you provide or we collect will not be disclosed to third parties...
...
21.5 ... CouchSurfing may assign any or all of its rights under these Terms, in whole or in part, without obtaining your consent or approval.

Note from the Researcher
A check on the Terms of Use as of 24/1/13 shows that the Terms of Use has been changed again, updated since Oct 2012, however the excerpts as shown are still in use, ad verbatim, apart from some changes in numbering. All versions (there are 7, from 2006 to 2012) of CouchSurfing.org's TOU can be found at the archives of the CouchSurfing Knowledge Base[114].

Exhibit 6-4 Excerpts from new "Terms of Use"

As a response to the community backlash, CouchSurfing's Communications and Community Manager justified that the broad license was needed for the necessary operations of the website. The TOU provided CouchSurfing (1) the right to use content for their services, such as displaying member content on their profiles; (2) the ability to retain data for safety purposes, for situations such as checking information of flagged profiles created by questionable members who deleted their old profiles to start anew; and (3)a broad platform to innovate without having to update the TOU repeatedly. It was also stated that CouchSurfing's Privacy Policy ensured that individual data will not be sold to advertisers or marketers without the member's knowledge and consent, and tools and options would be given to control one's personal data. CouchSurfing could, however, transfer data to third party contractors who handled the verification process, for example. Aggregated and anonymized data could be shared with third parties.

The issue of the CouchSurfing's Terms of Use is a complicated one. On one hand, it is stated in the CouchSurfing's Privacy Policy that CouchSurfing is compliant to the US-EU Safe Harbor Framework and the US-Swiss Safe Harbor Framework, and has certified its adherence to the Safe Harbor Privacy Principles of Notice, Choice, Onward Transfer, Security, Data Integrity, Access and Enforcement with respect to personal data collected from members in the EU and Switzerland. On the other hand, in the profile of CouchSurfing International in the Safe Harbor website[115], a resounding "No" is replied to the question, "Do You Agree to Cooperate and Comply

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[114]https://sites.google.com/site/cskbase/terms-of-use, accessed on 28/1/13
[115]http://safeharbor.export.gov/companyinfo.aspx?id=16408, accessed on 28/1/13.

with the EU and/or Swiss Data Protection Authorities?"The Safe Harbor programme makes sure that US companies comply with the EU Directive 95/46/EC on the protection of personal data, yet the press release from the German Federal Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information appears to indicate that CouchSurfing's TOU (which had not been significantly reworded to reflect any changes) is non-compliant to the standards of the European Union.

Further investigation into the matter took me deeper and deeper into the complexities of international data protection laws and policies, which is beyond the scope of this study. For the time being, it is sufficient to note that the issue of data protection and privacy had dealt another blow to CouchSurfing International's credibility towards its community, especially to those located in Europe, who forms about 50% of its member base. Besides that, without assurance of data protection, users concerned about this issue would be reluctant to share content (writings, photographs, etc.) on their profile, thus directly impacting their involvement in the system. With less data in the profiles, it is more difficult for both trustors and trustees to construct narratives of trustworthiness.

Changes in the Website

Within months after the conversion, the website underwent several revamps, and changes continue to happen fairly frequently even up till the time of writing (February 2013). The front page layout was altered a few times. Events and activities, as well as forum groups, which were previously hidden in the menu bar, were now prominently displayed on the dashboard, presumably to encourage community activities. A new feature (Open Couch Requests) enabled travellers to display their itineraries, so that hosts could invite nearby or future travellers to their homes (like a reversed couch request). One could now opt to link her CouchSurfing account with her Facebook account. The forum pages that were once closed to registered members only were opened up to search engines, and users were allowed to delete their past messages before the change took effect. Data that were formerly publicly available, such as the member statistics and financial information, were removed. Mid-2012, the organization rolled out a mobile application for smart phones.

Figure 6-2 Old (left) and New (right) Logos of CouchSurfing

In November 2012, the logo of CouchSurfing was redesigned (see Figure 6.3). The reasons for the change were given by the Communications and Community Officer on the new support forum as follows:

> We say it all the time: Couchsurfing isn't about the couches. Anyone who truly understands Couchsurfing knows that we're really about the people, and the connections that we enable them to make with each other and with the places that they travel and live. However, our current logo is dominated by two things that contradict this: the word Couch and an image of a couch.
>
> From the discussions here, it's clear that for many members, that couch represents hospitality. It's true that together we've made this a shared symbol for so much more than just sleeping at someone's house. But our concern is that when we're talked about by those who don't understand what that symbol means — for example, in the dozens of blog posts and news articles that talk about Couchsurfing every day — the impression that it gives off is "alternative to a hotel".
>
> Our objective with this new logo was to focus on the entire word 'couchsurfing' and turn it into a term that has meaning in and of itself. We're not about 'Couch' and 'Surfing', we are about the act of 'couchsurfing', of connecting with people for inspiring experiences all over the world. We'd like to turn the word itself into the symbol that the couch has been.
>
> The designers brought this sense of human touch to life with the font they chose for the logo, which suggests handwriting. The more earthy shade of orange was chosen because it gives a sense of authenticity which reinforces the humanity of our brand.[116]

The new logo did not seem to be well-received by the community, judging from the long list of negative reactions that followed the explanation[117]. A careful reading of the explanation (as quoted above)also indicates that the organization is lifting its emphasis from CouchSurfing's core function of facilitating hosting and

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[116] "The ideas behind the new logo", https://support.couchsurfing.org/entries/22370796-the-ideas-behind-the-new-logo, accessed on 26/1/13

[117] "The ideas behind the new logo", https://support.couchsurfing.org/entries/22370796-the-ideas-behind-the-new-logo, accessed on 26/1/13

surfing to a wider range of activities and meet ups. Indeed, a statement by Tony Espinoza confirms that: "When it started, the killer application for the service was people finding a place to stay, and that's how it grew. But now at this point, it's more people finding people to do things with, things that they love to do, things they want to explore."[118]

A few weeks after the introduction of the new logo, another major feature called "Place Pages" was rolled out. The Place Pages were installed as a new navigation tool and had a section called "Conversations" that was put in place to replace city forum groups. The Place pages grouped cities/towns/regions together in areas (a real example – "Vancouver Area, including: Richmond, Burnaby, Surrey, North Vancouver, Coquitlam, and Surrounding Areas"). The rationale behind this was to expand the reach of Couchsurfers to smaller towns and cities near the major cities. The migration of the groups was widely regarded as poorly executed, and provoked harsh reactions from the community. One particularly critical mistake stood out above the rest:through using inaccurate city data, numerous localities were incorrectly combined. A partial list of especially problematic geographical categorizations provided by a user named "Bluedragon" illustrates the gravity of these errors:

- Kashmir = 'Lahore area, including Kashmir'
- Pyongyang = 'Seoul area, including Pyongyang'
- Bethlehem = 'Philadelphia Area, including Bethlehem'
- Ramallah, Jenin, Gaza = 'This location was not found'.
- Jerusalem = 'Tel Aviv area, including Jerusalem'
- Hebron = 'New Haven area, including Hebron'

The list of wrongly associated localities was long. Members flooded the support forum with enraged feedback, angered by the lack of geographical knowledge and political sensitivities shown through the Place Pages debacle. As expressed by another community member[119],

> You may all be based in USA and never have had to deal with shifting borders or wars in your lifetime for independence and freedom, but this is not the case in the entire world. As in the examples BlueDragon gave. Northern Ireland still has tension, even using the wrong name for Derry/Londonderry in the wrong

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[118] "CEO of Couchsurfing Reveals Commercialization of Community [FULL VERSION]", http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=OkyMW7S9RWg#t=97s, accessed on 27/1/13

[119] "[Official] Place Pages- discussion thread (Archived), https://support.couchsurfing.org/entries/22548426-official-place-pages?page=2, accessed on 29/1/13

situation can cause a person 'issues' [Derry/Londonderry had been erroneously demarcated within the borders of the Republic of Ireland]. As for mixing up things in the former Yugoslavia? Wow. So many people died in the not so distant past for those borders to be where they currently are, and there is still a LOT of hatred between countries there. This is not a minor trivial issue for the people there. The hatred and guns still exist, and the blood that was spilled will never be forgotten.

The confusion over locations also made it difficult for members to find local information, for surfing couches or for finding activities to participate in. The community was not notified of the change before it happened, and was taken by surprise. The Place Pages feature had not been beta-tested, resulting in multiple problems from the aspects of user-friendliness and functionality, as well as bugs within the system. "Conversations" within the Place Pages did not have many features of the old forum groups, such as the search function, permalinks, privacy controls, moderators, etc. Members were also appalled that the content that was built by the community over the years had not been migrated to the new Place Page. Complaints and protests about the new changes in were reportedly censored, provoking further outrage[120]. The support forum on the topics[121] of Place Pages overflowed with several pages of negative feedback, while the CouchSurfing staff grappled with firefighting and crisis control. Another slew of Ambassador resignations ensued[122], some of whom that I know personally or recognize to be extremely active within the local communities. Exhibit 6.5 is the text of a protest group amassed in a Facebook event (with 3,567 attendees), that encapsulates the main complaints.

[120]"This is insane - no freedom of speech" , http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=13920063, accessed on 29/1/13
[121] "[Official] Place Pages- discussion thread (Archived), https://support.couchsurfing.org/entries/22548426-official-place-pages?page=2, accessed on 29/1/13
"[Official] Place Pages - Discussion Thread (UPDATED- Dec 8) – continued", https://support.couchsurfing.org/entries/22584003-official-place-pages-discussion-thread-updated-dec-8-continued, accessed on 29/1/13
[122]http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=13927483

PROTEST against CouchSurfing: Give us back our local communities and stop censorship. NOW![123]

On 6th December 2012, Couchsurfing corporation suddenly culled most of its city groups. City groups that were built painstakingly as a great source of information and a strong community by members and non-paid volunteers over years. Something like a travel and activity wikipedia of each city.

But voila one day they were suddenly gone. To get an idea, take the Berlin community as an example. If one would have gone to the city group until the 6th of December, he would have seen tens of clearly marked out threads about a range of events/suggestions/invitations. From sauna, to cooking, to guitar lessons, to photo shoots in the wild, to beer in unknown gems, to christmas markets, to the best electro party in the town..pretty much anything one may imagine to want or see. One could also search for an interest activity and find out the related information and discussions about them.

But if you would now go to Berlin you'll see this https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/places/berlin-berlin-germany. Something like a Craigslist with chat windows. Completely butchering the community aspect of what was once the very core of this network. Or perhaps worse than Craigslist, as member privacy is also violated here with their names and pictures displayed conspicuously even if their personal settings are against it. One cannot search the old threads or access them with permalinks either.

This may well be the final nail in the coffin of CS for many like us, who have not only given it so much love and time through the years, but also the benefit of doubt when it one day suddenly redressed itself as a for-profit corporation from a non-profit. Though it was built over by thousands of hours of volunteer sweat, donated for free under the good faith that it was being used for the visionary idea of global free hospitality exchange.

The community could have even survived the most fascist and exploitative ToU that were introduced by CS last September. (I don't wanna push the discussion astray, but you can easily cross-verify that CS currently has a much worse privacy than Facebook, or pretty much any significant social network one can think of). But if the decision to cull our communities is not quickly reversed, it may well be the grand end of it all. Or at the very least, the end of the community we have nurtured and wanted to be a part of.

We'd also like to seek the immediate dismissal of the current community managers, who cannot be bothered to communicate properly about such a big change, or even do a simple beta test of the 'update'. It is FULL of bugs. The current managers also use the most flimsy of excuses to censor members; which to the credit of CS was never done in 7 years since its inception, even when the leadership was put under the harshest of criticisms and attacks. Some of the current managers have ZERO Couchsurfing hosting, surfing or traveling experience, and post angry cat gifs in the

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[123]https://www.facebook.com/events/134863673334252/

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serious discussions with the community members in an official channel. Others repeatedly promise deadlines that they cannot meet, and refuse to offer explanations or acknowledgment. Why should they be paid for these 'services'?

Couchsurfing we PROTEST: Give us back our groups and our community back. NOW!

*I've drafted this protest letter from my own experience on CS, and after reading as many opinions as I could. But sure as would always be the case, some may disagree with how I've drafted our disillusionment and demand. I would like to stick to the minimum common denominator, so we can get maximum people on board. If you feel there is a part of the draft that you disagree with, please post it here or send me a PM. If 10% of the supporters here share your opinion, I'd be happy edit the draft to that effect.

Thank you!
[member name]

Exhibit 6-5 PROTEST against CouchSurfing: Give us back our local communities and stop censorship. NOW!

Analysis: Crumbling of Trust Narratives

Right after the conversion of CouchSurfing International to a for-profit corporation in August 2011, member activity (including hosting, surfing, organization of events, and participation in the online forums) seemed to be a case of business as usual. Even when talking to disillusioned members, most still trusted other members of the community, seeing them as independent from the organization's actions. However, a year and a half after the conversion, the climate appears to have changed for the worse, as the number of new and empty profiles surged and the dissatisfaction of the older members grew. As I write this section in early February 2013, member dissatisfaction towards CouchSurfing.org appears to be at its highest point. Numerous protests and petitions illustrate this point, and are listed in Appendix I.

Through trawling pages of grievances and antagonism, I have found that the main complaint is about the changes in the website which do not serve the members. Putting the alleged wrongdoings and trust violations by CouchSurfing International aside, it is the misguided changes on the website that did most of the damage in disrupting the social processes that helpedthe building of trust narratives. Exhibit 6.6 is an open letter to the CEO of CouchSurfing International, written by an active member. It highlights a few complaints about the changes of the website that obscure the trust-building processes. Through a systematic breakdown of the specific changes and the

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following consequences, I strengthen earlier arguments on how user-to-user trust is built on e2f-SNSs.

<u>An Open Letter to Tony, CEO</u>

Dear Tony,

A new couchsurfing member who requested my hospitality in the past couple of days just wrote to me:

"William, are you okay? ... could just host me days 27-30? I trust you more than all the others. Please let me know if you can!"

What others?

She told me she had received 10 offers of a couch, all from men. I assure you, this is quite normal for a young lady travelling by herself. (I talk to couchsurfers every day.) I don't like to make offers to couchsurfers who post OCRs anymore because I feel it is an insult to my hospitality, but that's actually not why I wanted to write to you.

The point is, when she told me she's scared by all the offers she received, I realised she was vocalising a huge new problem on couchsurfing now. You have to really wonder to what extent this is damaging the culture of trust on CS. The knock on effects are:
- Large numbers of hosts are not being replied to. That creates a bad feeling when these people have been kind enough to offer their "little world" to others.
- People are more suspicious than ever of hosts. "Why does this person want me in their home?"

The solution is to stop new members from posting open couch requests, because most of them have no idea the implications: the number of offers they will receive (or not), how bad it is for the community when they forget about their OCR and clog up the system. They have no understanding of what will happen when they click that box "share this section so all hosts in the area can see it". Therefore you need to remove that check box altogether. You need to remove the link to "create an open request" when   someone   goes   to   post   on   a   place   page.

Couchsurfing was a ground breaking new trust network and worked for reasons no one person fully understands. However, we the experienced users understand that OCR is damaging the trust of the community. OCR is an unproven system and all promotion of it should be removed from the site! I understand the value of the OCR system which is why I do not think it should be scrapped entirely. People will still use it, and still talk about it, without all this unnecessary linking and promotion. The only way anyone should be posting an OCR is through the "itinerary" tab, having thought carefully about it, while understanding their responsibility to the community, and the likely repercussions of the open request.

90% of brand new members will never understand the repercussions of open couch requests. Couchsurfing is a lot for most people to get their head around. The idea of a

stranger letting you into their home is a mind bender for many people. These people should be learning about the project by visiting experienced members profiles, not by viewing messages and requests from brand new members who have no clue what this is all about. Every part of couchsurfing was built in the beginning through a network of trust. I have no problem with new members, in fact, most of the hundreds of people I have hosted were new. I love hosting them because I can teach them all what couchsurfing is about. But the systems you are now creating are flooding the website with content created by new members. Love it or hate it, you and the team in SF are not the people who really run this community. The members who "get" CS are.

The way place pages are set up, with any member being a moderator... the way OCR works... this whole thing is equivalent to a nation's government being run by visitors to that nation. It is the regulars, the core users who hold couchsurfing together. Hush their voice and highlight the voice of ignorance and you will watch this community fall apart.

Thank you for reading.

Exhibit 6-6 An Open Letter to Tony, CEO

Firstly, the Open Couch Requests (OCRs) was deemed to "damage the culture of trust" in the community. OCR is a function that travelers can use to post a publicly viewable couch request within the city page. Hosts that are interested can extend an invitation to the traveler. Before the OCR was implemented in early 2012, the couch requests worked uni-directionally, from surfer to host, whereby the surfer browses a list of hosts, finds some interesting hosts that match their requirements, and sends out requests. The host receives a request, reads the profile of the request sender, and makes a decision whether to host or not. In the new system, hosts within a city can browse through a list of OCRs and choose a guest. In theory, this matching system should increase the chances of hosts getting surfers and surfers getting hosts (and indeed, there have been successful matches, as reported in forums).

However, the OCR disrupts the host/surfer dynamics. In the past, the interaction was structured in a way that surfers "work" on personalized and polite requests, in order to get tangible benefits offered by hosts – free accommodation, food, advice, and so on. There is a certain power imbalance in this interaction, as the perceived value offered by the host is higher than the surfer. Hence, the host holds the power to reject requests from surfers. The nuances of this process are subtle, but important because they correspond with the logic of the narratives built – that the surfer needs the host's hospitality more than the host needs the surfer's company, therefore the surfer should be the one who initiates the interaction. In the case of

OCRs, when the host writes an invitation to a surfer, the surfer now holds the power to accept or reject the invitation for free hospitality, which makes the surfer wonder if the situation is too good to be true, and if there are any ulterior motives behind the invitation. This is especially true for single female travelers, like the one described in the letter. "Why does this person want me in their home?"

Another interesting point brought forth by the letter is that new members are learning about the system through OCRs featured prominently in the Place pages, which are mostly written by other new members. Previously, through reading profiles of hosts and sending personalized requests (and getting feedback), new surfers could get a better sense of the subcultural capital valued by the community – the trait of reflexive cosmopolitanism, that one is more interested in cultural exchange than on free accommodation. The disrupted socialization process has widespread implications. First is the often-heard lamentation of declining quality of the members, which refer to members who neither possess objectified subcultural capital (in the form of a well-filled profile, references and vouches) nor embodied subcultural capital (the sensibility to send a good request). Second, and perhaps more damaging, is the *perception* that the community is flooded with new members who do not understand the spirit of CouchSurfing, and the older members who "get CS" are increasingly marginalized. This is compounded by the fact that the new accounts are easily registered (within 12 seconds, according to one account[124]), with no initiation to the social norms of the subculture.

The imagination of CouchSurfing being a community of reflexive cosmopolites is progressively eroded, making it harder to construct trust narratives based on a trustworthy community (i.e. a community which majority of its members are culturally competent and engage in CouchSurfing activities for the higher purpose of cultural exchange, and not freeloading or other ulterior motives). The mainstreaming of CouchSurfing means that a user has to filter through more people to get a good match. The accumulation of subcultural capital still applies, but this is subject to the activities that the members engage in. The trust levels needed to host/surf are higher than that of going to events held in public places, for example – and the possession of subcultural capital is more important in the former than in the

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[124] "Hello", https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/threads/barcelona-cataluna-spain-hi-please-read-this-carefully-i-have-an-important-point-to-make-i-just-created-my-couchsurfing-account-in-under-12accessed on 6/2/13

latter. Since the main instrumental goal facilitated by CouchSurfing.org for its members is no longer hosting and surfing which requires a high level of trust, the importance of the metanarrative dwindles. The weakened metanarrative is compounded by the trend that more and more members see CouchSurfing.org as a service than a community (as argued in Chapter 4). Trust-building in between hosts and surfers is still possible, but one has to work harder at building trust narratives without a strong metanarrative.

Technological affordances support social processes. The huge outcry about the introduction of Place pages is caused by the disruption of these social processes. The changes were not communicated beforehand nor tested, and it was repeatedly pointed out by members within the community that the employees have limited CouchSurfing experience. As a result of the disconnect from the community, the platform was redesigned to look streamlined and sleek but did not cater to the needs of the community. The virtual community was split into two, as the members had two avenues to congregate online: the old forum groups which worked better but were hidden from easy access (one had to navigate through multiple clicks to get to them), and new "Conversations" which were prominently displayed in the Place pages. A discussion by the city ambassadors[125] collecting local reports of the effects of Place pages and Conversations showed that the communities were mostly adversely affected by the changes, with a proliferation of new and empty profiles writing misplaced open couch requests and spam, and regular activities and discussions drowned out by noise[126].

The migration of the old forum groups into the Place pages was supposed to merge these two avenues, but ran into multiple issues. The migrations did not happen at the same time globally, instead they were done in stages – therefore you would find bigger cities that were further into the migration process than smaller places, which still had the old system. Adding to the confusion is the mixed up geographical locations as described in the previous section, which disrupted the offline local events (because they are organized online).Active members felt helpless and estranged; as a result many ambassadors resigned from their positions. The disintegration of the

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[125] A diverse list of cities was represented: Tokyo, Amsterdam, Melbourne, London, Ensenada, Dublin, Los Angeles, Edwardsville, Berlin, Veenendaal, Copenhagen, Chapel Hill, Bangalore, Sydney, Atlanta, Tainan, Victoria, Brisbane, Helsinki, Rotterdam, Chicago, Darwin, Hong Kong, and Salamanca.
[126] "Why don't we report the current state of CS communities from around the world?"http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=13995871 accessed on 5/2/13

virtual community was a cause to these outcomes, as shown by quotes from two resigned ambassadors:

> "I can't answer the questions that are being put to me by my local community. I don't know how the new system is supposed to work. I don't know where to find the answers as we are being stonewalled by the powers that be(not a new thing) and been given platitudes(we are listening, we care about your opinion, we will see what changes we can make) as opposed to real answers. My posts in my city places page are being deleted with limited or no explanation. As I can't help my local community, which is why I became an ambassador, there is no reason for me to remain as one. I can welcome new members, run events, surf couches, host surfers, etc. just as well with or without some pixels on my profile."[127]

> "When I became an ambassador, almost 5 years ago, there was already a gap between the users of couchsurfing and the communities they formed at one side and the people who run this site at the other. At that time the site was already run on an extremely top-down way, but at least there were plenty of options to use the site with a bottom-up approach. With the groups and wiki there were a lot of ways to make couchsurfing your own. Besides that, there was an active group of experienced couchsurfers who were helping to get things organised. My loyalty has always been with this group of people. Over the years almost all of these people went away and nobody took their place. It got harder and harder to stay positive about couchsurfing. […]The deletion of the old style groups was another step in getting rid of bottom-up possibilities. There was loads of information in the group info and moderating worked pretty ok with your own guidelines. In the Netherlands we, as a team effort, made a very good organisation of all the subgroups. Suddenly this all had to go. Without any communication a lot of groups were replaced for something new that was clearly not tested. Over the world people were insulted because Couchsurfing does not seem to understand the geography of the world outside the Bay Area. Yes, the new groups have been improved since last week, but the website is still full of things that make the geography teacher in me very sad (Antwerpen as part of Brussel, Pyongyang as part of Seoul, etc). The reply from Couchsurfing that there are only 'some mistakes' can only mean that Couchsurfing does not care about geography. Quite sad for a worldwide travel network."[128]

Keep Calm and Join BeWelcome?

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the virtual community component is an essential part of the e2f-SNS. The e2f-SNS becomes ineffective in bridging the online/offline gap when the platform fails to support the social structure, and the social processes

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[127] "AMB Flag and resignations"
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=13927483#post13928190, accessed on 5/2/13
[128] "So long and thanks for all the fish!"
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=1348&post=13944936 accessed on 5/2/13

that are vital for trust-building (such as facilitating the propagation of the metanarrative). Not being able to use the website for its purposes, and disenfranchised about where CouchSurfing is heading, many active members are migrating to rival website BeWelcome, which to date has about 30,000 members, mostly based in Europe. Indeed, a Facebook Event scheduled for 14th February 2013 (later changed to 23rd February) for a mass migration has about 900 attendees at this point, about a week before the date[129]. The promotional banner is shown in Figure 6.4.

Figure 6-3 Keep calm and join BW

There is a historical context to why BeWelcome.org is often touted as the main alternative, especially when members are provoked by perceived trust violations by CouchSurfing International. BeWelcome was set up by volunteers of Hospitality Club after they were disgruntled with the founder's approach to leading the organization. Founded in 2000, Hospitality Club engaged many passionate volunteers until some left, circa 2006, because of issues of lack of transparency, manipulation of volunteers, disagreement over the legal status, and so on. (Interestingly, the history of Hospitality Club is reminiscent of what has been discussed in the history of CouchSurfing, during the era of volunteers.) The estranged volunteers then set up BeVolunteer, a non-profit organization based in France, to build a new hospitality exchange network

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[129] "MIGRATION – From CS to BW – Take action now!"
https://www.facebook.com/events/378343315592387/ accessed on 6/2/13

BeWelcome. BeWelcome went online in 2007. When volunteers for CouchSurfing resigned in 2007, some joined BeVolunteer.

With this background, it is unsurprising that BeVolunteer incorporates certain principles in its mission statement: having a democratic work environment for the volunteers (BeVolunteer is completely run by volunteers), and a transparent organization with a reliable legal and organizational structure. BeWelcome also runs on open source code and has a relatively strong privacy policy. However, BeWelcome has only 30,000 member profiles, against 5 million CouchSurfing profiles. In terms of numbers, it is far from being a viable alternative; many of the CouchSurfing members who have a profile on BeWelcome lament the low level of activity and number of inactive profiles on the network. Because the site is solely run by volunteers and donations, it is also less versatile. For the time being, CouchSurfing still has the numbers, and the resources to build a strong platform.

BeWelcome receives a spike in new registrations whenever big controversies arise in CouchSurfing.org, such as the conversion to a for-profit organization, the update in the Terms of Use, and the installation of Place pages[130]. Indeed, its membership doubled in 2012 because of said issues. Some CouchSurfers who have migrated to BeWelcome has even said that those who have the "right spirit" are now filtered into BeWelcome, making it easier to filter for people who are trustworthy[131]. With CouchSurfing's weakened metanarrative, BeWelcome emerges as a hospitality exchange community that better represents reflexive cosmopolites, though it remains to be seen if BeWelcome would gain enough of traction to achieve a tipping point in its global membership to be a prominent player in the hospitality exchange area.

After the major fiasco of the Place pages and much negative feedback, the corporation appears to be trying harder to listen to its community[132]. With feedback forums[133], a monthly webcast series of staff interviews[134], and a weekly blog

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[130] According to statistics at http://www.bewelcome.org/stats, accessed on 17/2/13
[131] "Maybe it is the best thing that could happen?"
http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=10248613, accessed on 31/7/12
[132] "How can CS show members that we are listening?"
https://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=14060508
[133] "CouchSurfing Support Centre" https://support.couchsurfing.org/categories/20065081-Community-Feedback-Forums accessed on 17/2/13
[134] "Introducing the Couchsurfing Monthly Webcast"
http://www.couchsurfing.org/news/news/introducing-the-couchsurfing-monthly-webcast/ accessed on 17/2/13

update[135], the organization has multiple avenues to communicate with its community, to explain website updates and solicit feedback. Changes on the CouchSurfing website continue to happen every other day. I found myself updating the manuscript endlessly, as major events crop up every few months, requiring new documentation and analysis of data. However, every research project ends at some point. In the next chapter, I conclude the study by putting together all the findings and analyses.

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[135] "Big Things Have Small Beginnings: Community Update 1.24.13"
http://www.couchsurfing.org/news/cs-organization/big-things-have-small-beginnings-community-update-1-24-13/ accessed on 17/2/13

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSION

How is user-to-user trust built on e2f-SNSs such as CouchSurfing.org?

In this last chapter of my thesis, I would like to return to the main research question as stated above, and assemble all the theoretical and empirical insights obtained to answer it. I argue that user-to-user trust is built through trustors forming narratives of trustworthiness from information gathered from the e2f-SNS platform. The narratives of trustworthiness are used to aid the trustors in overcoming irreducible uncertainty and make the leap of faith from online interactions to offline encounters. These narratives are formed within a social context, through a metanarrative of the community, and they are shaped through individual, idiosyncratic perceptions of risk and expected outcomes of the interactions. On e2f-SNSs, users are offered an array of features and tools to build these narratives, through sending and interpreting signals of purposeful presentation of self. Through impression management in a way that reflects traits deemed important by the community, trustees help the trustors in building the narratives, while trustors attempt to read between the lines and optimize the match.

Möllering's theoretical framework of trust (2001, 2006) has guided the philosophical and practical conceptualization of trust. This study follows his recommendations of an interpretative approach to trust, looking at the processes and actual trust experiences within their social context. The central idea of Möllering's trust framework is that "trust combines good reasons with faith" (Möllering, 2001, p.411). The trustor forms interpretations through processes of reason, routine and reflexivity – forming good reasons to trust, and then makes a leap of faith through a process of suspending irreducible uncertainty and vulnerability. There are three ways in which actors suspend their lack of certainty: through creating narratives to enable themselves to act as if the situation was unproblematic, through living with the missing pieces of information and doing it anyway, and through having the will to trust. The first is the most relevant to our study which focuses on the activities surrounding the platform of e2f-SNSs, while the latter ways focus mostly on the individuals and are beyond the scope of my study.

CouchSurfing.org, as a hospitality exchange network, makes for an interesting case study because the ultimate face-to-face interaction between strangers takes place in the intimate setting of a home – a step that most people would only take once trust

has been established – based only on reading each other's online profile and exchanging a few messages over the internet. From the case, it is found that narratives of trustworthiness are usually about potential face-to-face interactions, and the potential interaction partner. Two main texts are prevalent: who is the trustee, and how would the interaction with him/her be like? Through gathering information about the trustee, the trustor tries to make sure that the trustee's story is coherent and does not contain contradictory parts, and also that they make a suitable match for a good face-to-face experience. The closer the imagined interaction is to the desired interaction, the easier it is for her to make the leap of faith to trust.

The characteristics of e2f-SNSs are well-suited for building narratives of trustworthiness. Firstly, personal profiles are of utmost importance, as it is the first point of contact with a person's front. It is crucial to have a well-crafted virtual persona to present oneself in a good light. Secondly, e2f-SNSs facilitate the connection of users for specific functions, such as hospitality exchange and rideshares. Thirdly, users connect to each other through a matching process that I have coined as "social matching", as opposed to "social browsing" or "social searching" which were proposed as ways in which users find new friends through f2e-SNSs like Facebook (Lampe et al., 2006). Social matching is done through entering some criteria into a search engine, which generates a list of potential interaction partners, which the user then chooses from. Fourthly, trust mechanisms are also present in e2f-SNSs, that usually provide a feedback loop from the offline to the online (such as references and the display of one's social network), that verify a person's identity or provide indication of a successful face-to-face interaction. Fifthly, the virtual community factor is strong in e2f-SNSs, as online forums facilitate discussions and community building. The community provides support and social norm generation through the forums, as users typically start with no friend connections, and grow their networks through meeting other users offline. Common features on e2f-SNSs therefore include personal profiles, a search engine, a viewable friend list, an online forum, and the ability to leave review or ratings.

With that, we have the foundation laid for looking at narratives of trustworthiness in order to build trust. What are the factors that shape the content of these narratives, and how do the actors use the e2f-SNS to convey the narratives? These two questions were explored in depth in two separate chapters.

Content of Narratives of Trustworthiness

I have found that there is a metanarrative that underlies most narratives created, of an idealistic image of the CouchSurfing community as a cosmopolitan group of travellers who are authentic and reflexive, and who subscribe to a certain ethos. Reflexive cosmopolitanism, which entails certain emotional commitments such as being empathetic and interested about other cultures, and an ethical commitment to universalist values and ideas that reach beyond the local. This is demonstrated by the social taboos on CouchSurfing, which shun people who do CouchSurfing for the purpose of other ends (whether for sex or solely for free accommodation) rather than cultural exchange, or people who are close-minded and hold racist or other prejudiced views. The social norms and metanarrative mutually reinforce each other, and provides the normative framework in which CouchSurfing activities are conducted. However, as I have shown, not all members of the community agree with the metanarrative, as some counter-narratives exist to argue that cultural exchange is a positive, but not necessary element of CouchSurfing. Some view free accommodation as the main, if unstated, objective and the dominant discourse of cultural exchange as hypocritical. I argue that the existence of a counter discourse accentuates the existence of a metanarrative, and the level to which the metanarrative is influential is determined by whether one views CouchSurfing as a community or a service.

Zooming into the individual level, one's risk perception is the other factor that shapes the narratives of trustworthiness. Risk is dynamic, contextual and historical. The level of risk perceived affects the amount of information needed to form the narratives, as a higher level of risk perceived would require a more intricate narrative to help make the leap of faith. Factors affecting the level of uncertainty perceived include one's level of experience, confidence and control, or other idiosyncratic interpretations of potential risks. One's expectations of the interaction also influences the narratives formed, and the level of risk perceived. It is found that in most instances, the trustor tends to trust people who match them in terms of expected outcomes of the interaction. There are three layers of expectations: (1) that the trustee would not threaten the trustor's personal safety; (2) the trustor would get along with the trustee; or (3) the trustor expects an interesting experience of cultural exchange. These are seen as layers because one can have more than one layer of expectation at

the same time: for example, a host who expects to get along with her surfer would usually expect to be safe in his presence as well. The more layers of expectations one has, the more complex the narrative of trustworthiness will be.

Use of E2f-SNSs to Convey Narratives of Trustworthiness

We have seen the logic behind the building of the narratives, but that in itself only answers half of the question of how trust is built. The other half of the question deals with how the actors engage in presentation of self on the e2f-SNS to convey the narratives of trustworthiness – trustees in managing their impressions, and trustors in forming impressions. Again, there are two angles, from a community perspective and from an individual perspective. At the community level, actors are observed to perform reflexive cosmopolitanism to accumulate subcultural capital, in line with the metanarrative of CouchSurfers as being reflexive cosmopolites. The keenness to embrace cultural diversity and differences is performed and propagated through one's subcultural capital, i.e. widely shared cultural signals (such as attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and credentials) within the community of CouchSurfing. CouchSurfers strategize their actions and behaviour according to reflexive cosmopolitanism, a trait that is prized within the community, to gain status and social acceptance. One has embodied subcultural capital when she is able to behave like a respectful, interesting and open-minded cosmopolite (and this has to be perceived as "genuine", or as second nature to the person); and objectified subcultural capital on one's profile include references, friend links, vouches, various community designations that are accumulated with experience and positive past experiences. Negative references on one's profile tend to deplete one's subcultural capital, and are seldom left because of the fear of retaliatory negative feedback, the unwillingness to seem close-minded (and not enjoying cultural exchange), or because of the lack of anonymity that comes with anchored identity.

At the individual level, there are references and other trust mechanisms that provide the tools for trustors to gather information and to assemble the narrative. In terms of references, an interesting phenomenon is observed whereby the reference writers try to write between the lines and give hidden messages behind positive references that hint of a negative experience; however trustors who read the profile tend to look at the number of positive references instead of the actual content of the references once the number of references reaches a large enough number. If there are

no negative references, due to the lack of time, trustors tend to skim through the first few positive references and assume that the rest are similar, focusing on the quantitative aspect instead of the qualitative aspect of references. This has to be contextualized against the factor of risk perception, as some cautious trustors do look further between the lines and attribute importance to various cues such as unreciprocated references or neutral references as signs of trouble. It is also found that there have been instances of trustees manipulating trust mechanisms, through various ways of backstage preparation for the front stage, such as negotiating for positive references or vouches. Trustors can also go behind the scenes to inquire more about the supposedly positive references.

Besides presenting oneself to be a reflexive cosmopolite and to manipulate expressions given off through trust mechanisms, I have found that CouchSurfers also present themselves to optimize the match. Some hosts use the tactic of including a "keyword" in their profiles and insist that potential guests include that keyword in their couch requests. This filters out people who may not have read the profile, who can be inferred to be interested only in free accommodation and not in the host or the local culture, or people who may not be a good match because they did not read and understand the host's preferences and constraints. Also, it is stated by some respondents that they craft their profile try to attract the type of people that they want to attract, and the profile is not supposed to be universally attractive. Those who demonstrate that they have read the profile sufficiently and who want to meet face-to-face would already be filtered as people who are probably good matches.

The Organization's Impact on User-to-User Trust

To discuss this, an extensive historical account is presented, to give the reader an idea of the development of the CouchSurfing community and CouchSurfing International. From a volunteer-powered organization that members of the community closely identified with, CouchSurfing International eventually outgrew its volunteers and evolved to become a for-profit corporation. The era of volunteers was riddled with controversies concerning financial and organizational mismanagement, mistreatment of volunteers, lack of transparent communication and governance, and so on. The conversion of CouchSurfing International from a non-profit organization to a for-profit corporation was also done in dubious circumstances, as argued by some active community members. By the end of it, some questions were raised: why did some

users lose trust in the organization, and some did not? Why did majority of the users still support CouchSurfing International? How did the trust violations of the organization affect user-to-user trust within the CouchSurfing community?

These questions can be addressed by looking at previous points made about user-to-user trust building, and the building of narratives of trustworthiness. Viewing CouchSurfing International as an actor, it went against the metanarrative of reflexive cosmopolitanism in being open and ethical, and instead chose to capitalize upon contributions of volunteers and hosts. This caused furore within some factions of the community. However, because of CouchSurfing.org's rapid rise in membership, most newer members did not know, or understand, or care enough about the community's history or values, and viewed CouchSurfing more as a service than a community. In this case, the metanarrative was not as important for the new members, and it was more important for them that the service would remain free to use.

In its earlier years, the strong volunteer culture and sense of belonging to a community of reflexive cosmopolites gave the organization much subcultural capital. Essentially, the organization was run by the community, and it was easy to trust a community that appeared to be united for the objective of "changing the world, one couch at a time". This perception continued even when controversies were rife, because the average CouchSurfing member did not concern herself with the internal politics of the organization, and not much information was available due to the opaqueness of the organization. After the conversion, CouchSurfing International undertook an intense PR exercise to present itself in a favourable manner, which was quite successful. It is also important to note that arguments about the conversion are often situated within larger ideological debates of for and against capitalism, and it is still a matter of matching actors' expectations and ideologies. Members who felt outraged enough migrated to other hospitality exchange platforms, but to a large extent most people stayed on and continued with their activities, because of the subcultural capital that had already been accumulated on their profiles, and because of the perceived lack of alternatives.

Beyond the conversion, CouchSurfing International and CouchSurfing.org underwent a series of rapid changes. The organization's reputation took a few hits because of its controversial updates to the Terms of Use, and an unsuccessful rollout of a new version of the website which contained serious geographical errors. With the culling of volunteer teams, as well as a continued depletion of active members and

ambassador resignations, the organization and the community achieved an almost clear separation. Due to all these factors, the organization's subcultural capital plummeted.

The depletion of the organization's subcultural capital alone did not do much to affect user-to-user trust. Most users continued to trust in other users because they saw the separation in the community and the organization. However, user-to-user trust was affected by the organization in other ways. Beyond the conversion to a for-profit corporation, the organization was motivated to expand its member base rapidly. The organization turned its focus on events and activities (as opposed to the original focus on hosting and surfing) to draw a wider audience. The change of the CouchSurfing tagline, from "Participate in creating a better world, one couch at a time" circa 2008 (as cited in Heesakkers, 2008) to the current "CouchSurfing – The World's Largest Travel Community" indicates the watering down of the metanarrative of meaningful cultural exchange. Through mainstreaming CouchSurfing, strong advocates of the so-called CouchSurfing spirit became marginalized. The easy signup process also created a spike in new and empty profiles. Existing members perceived and decried the decline in member quality (i.e. members with limited subcultural capital).

Besides the "Facebookization" of the member base, as referred to by some, the management of CouchSurfing International also made some misguided changes in the website, resulting in the disruption of trust-building processes. The Open Couch Request feature did not take into account the nuances of host/surfer dynamics, thus obfuscating the building of narratives required to make the leap of faith. Forum groups were replaced by sleek new Place pages that lacked the functionality to support the social structure of the virtual community. New members who were already disadvantaged because of their lack of subcultural capital were further handicapped from learning the social norms and taboos effectively. All these cases demonstrated the importance of the platform providing technological affordances to build narratives of trustworthiness, and the disastrous outcomes when the organization tweaks the interface without taking user feedback into account.

At the present moment, CouchSurfing.org is at a transitional phase where it is redefining itself. From a non-profit, volunteer-based organization, it is now a corporation needing to generate income, answerable to its investors. In order to expand, CouchSurfing International struggles to grow its member base yet keep the loyalty of the older users. The rapid increase of new and inexperienced members destabilizes the social structure and impedes the building of a strong community that

supports the propagation of the metanarrative of reflexive cosmopolitanism. This is compounded by media exposure that often portrays CouchSurfing as a "free place to stay", attracting new members that are more interested in surfing than hosting. This growth is unsustainable, making it untenable for CouchSurfing International to focus on facilitating hosting and surfing. It is therefore a strategic move for CouchSurfing.org to broaden its scope to "create inspiring experiences" in the form of events and activities. Since the trust level required for going to public events and activities is not as high as admitting a stranger to one's home (or staying in a stranger's home), a strong metanarrative is not as essential to help CouchSurfers bridge the gap between online and offline. In fact, a watering down of the metanarrative to cosmopolitanism that centres on unreflexive and uncritical consumption of "The Other" may actually work in favour of the organization's future of rolling out travel products for its members.

In the meantime, the platform is still the largest hospitality exchange network, and users continue to reach out to other users who match them in terms of activity choices and expectations. Those who want to host and surf still need to accumulate subcultural capital to the satisfaction of potential partners, but those who use CouchSurfing primarily for attending and organizing events will have less motivation to do so. The weaker metanarrative is still useful to guide behaviour, but is less effective in alluding to a community of reflexive cosmopolites.

Future Research

The possibilities for future research are abundant, with regards to trust in the area of e2f-SNSs and on the case study of CouchSurfing. It would be interesting to apply the lessons learnt from this study to other e2f-SNSs to inspect the components of their trust-building processes. What would the accumulation of subcultural capital be based on, and what are the underlying metanarratives that guide the building of trust narratives? What are the factors that affect risk perception, expectations, and the leap of faith, as compared to the case of CouchSurfing?

As for CouchSurfing as a case, it would be useful to do a follow-up study a year or two later, after its users get used to the changes. Would the findings from this study still apply? Although it is out of the scope of the current study, the data collected can be analyzed to further refine narratives built, based on demographic differences such as gender, age and nationality. There is also potential for quantitative studies of

CouchSurfing activity patterns across nations (hosting, surfing, participation in virtual forums, and participation in events offline), and study the correlation of national trust levels as outlined by surveys on trust such as the World Values Survey.

Conclusion

A well-linked social network enables the efficient transmission of information from one person to another, and the networked individual gets the opportunity to amplify his/her ideas and actions. While the exchange of ideas is important, the true potential of a networked community lies in bridging the online to the offline, when people gather enough of information and inspiration to make concrete actions and connections in real life. The Arab Spring is a good example where social media was instrumental in mobilizing people to take to the streets. In countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, dissenters expressed their views on social media, organized offline action on social media, and after the events, reported about their civil disobedience on social media. Social media was a powerful tool but the real difference was made by bringing people together physically. Regimes were toppled.

With social media, people expand their social networks to meet others that are outside of their immediate social circle, to access resources that they would not otherwise have. A traveller gets access to a free bed in a strange city, a captain of a ship finds new crew members, a sexually curious person gets to explore her fetish with like-minded people. The benefits of increasing one's social capital this way comes with heightened risk. One has to deal with the uncertainty of offline interaction with someone unknown, who does not come with any strings attached as a friend-of-a-friend (for example), and could be lying about her real identity. Trust becomes the prerequisite of making this connection possible, for people to leave the safe warm glow of their screens to embrace face-to-face reality.

The E2f-SNS, a subset of SNSs, is engineered for the purpose of bridging the online to the offline. To recognize it as an important niche is the first step to capitalize upon its powerful function of offline social mobilization; the second step is to examine the trust-building processes it supports. In existing literature on SNSs, the concept of the e2f-SNS has not been adequately theorised. Past work on trust and trust-building processes is mostly based on f2e-SNSs which takes prior face-to-face interaction for granted. Even then, the focus is rarely on trust itself but on human behaviour on social networks that alludes to the presence of trust, such as indicators that predict friendship

links and increase interpersonal attraction. Trust has not been properly conceptualized, and without a solid theoretical focus on trust, we can never get to the core of understanding how it is built.

My main contributions therefore lie in defining and refining the area of e2f-SNSs, and researching on the trust-building processes they facilitate. I have highlighted the hitherto-neglected process of building narratives as an integral part of trust-building on SNSs. I argue that users create narratives about other users and on the potential interaction that may occur. This is the main way for users to suspend the unknown, to establish connections with other users to meet offline. The e2f-SNS has to support its users in creating the narratives of trustworthiness, and various features that make it distinct from f2e-SNSs exist to better create these narratives. Personal profiles and trust mechanisms serve to paint a caricature of the potential interaction partner from her own perspectives and perspectives of others. The matching system and common instrumental goals delineate the context of the interaction and clarify expectations on both sides. The virtual community provides the socialization and norms to better structure the interaction.

Technological affordances in place, the users of the e2f-SNS build their narratives of trustworthiness. The virtual community propagates the metanarrative that forms the imagination of a community and creates the norms and culture to reinforce this imagination. All users are new at some point, and accumulate subcultural capital specific to the e2f-SNS - emitting cultural signals that are socially appropriate and prized within the community. A successful e2f-SNS is able to support the propagation of the metanarrative, and provides adequate avenues through which users can display their subcultural capital, as to help other users form impressions and build narratives of trustworthiness. The point is not if the users are actually trustworthy in an objective sense, but that they appear to be so, enough for the leap of faith to the offline can be made. The e2f-SNS also makes sure that users of similar expectations will be matched to each other (people have different expectations of what interaction they want, one person's definition of trustworthy may not be the same with another).

There are two important implications of this study for trust research that I wish to emphasize. First is the underlying philosophy of the study: on how trust is highly contextual and requires a rich understanding of the interaction and its settings. The state of trust research in general is still skewed towards assuming direct causation from indicators of trustworthiness to trust. This assumption is faulty because one can

be studying trusting behaviour and misjudge the situation based on why people *ought to* trust, rather than why people actually do. A good mantra to abide by for any study on trust is: "good reasons do not always lead to trust, and trust does not always need good reasons". Secondly, a holistic study of trust needs to take into account the factors that come into play at societal and individual levels. Failure to account for either of these levels would produce research that is removed from the reality as experienced by the subjects. In the case where social interactions are supported by technological affordances, it is also important to examine the organization that builds the infrastructure, because its policies would affect these interactions. In particular, since this study falls within the research area of trust on social media, I hope that social media studies that follow will consider an interpretative, holistic philosophy of trust research that is firmly rooted in the subjects' natural setting.

The phenomenal success of CouchSurfing.org in forging offline connections is inspiring. The metanarrative of a community of open-minded travellers helping each other out is an appealing one. One important question to ask however, is whether and how other e2f-SNSs can emulate CouchSurfing's success. Can the metanarrative be consciously manufactured? Or does it need to be from ground-up and organic? Casey Fenton's idea was by no means revolutionary. Hospitality exchange networks had existed since 1949. Around the same period when CouchSurfing was growing, there were several competing websites. The crucial difference that set CouchSurfing apart from its competitors was a strong metanarrative. Fenton weaved together a heartwarming story about how his own trip to Iceland had exposed him to free hospitality, inspiring the birth of CouchSurfing.org. The CouchSurfing Collectives of the early years appealed to its target audience of free-thinking individuals who truly believed that CouchSurfing was a community of like-minded people. The organization was able to distill what was important for the community (also because for many years, the organization *was* the community), and propagated the metanarrative as such. This was the key to its success.

Therefore, the metanarrative has to come from the community, and the organization serves to support and build it. This probably applies to any organization, for profit or not. When an organization is able to capture the subcultural capital prized by the community, it will attract a good following. Like any other member of the community, the organization has to be perceived as authentic. Thus a community will start to gather. However, the network may reach a tipping point when it garners

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attention from the mass media. If it seizes the imagination of wider publics, it may then become mainstream. Along with this may come the pressure or temptation to commercialize. Commercialization itself should not be considered the "beginning of the end" of a network, because there are numerous success stories, such as Facebook or Twitter. On the other hand, there are cases where strong communities crumbled and left behind a digital ghost town, like MySpace, a few years after being acquired by News Corp.

What went right, or wrong, in these cases? A SNS, when big enough, locks in its users because there is where their friends are, and because they have invested a lot of time and energy in building a reputation. The loss of identity or dilution of metanarrative can be supplemented by continuously providing good quality service that still enables the users to achieve their goals on the platform. Problems arise when the new management does not understand what its community wants, and does not strategize according to these needs. Losing sight of this can cost an organization dearly, as the case of MySpace attests: its worth plummeted from $580 million to $35 million, from 2005 to 2011.

In the case of Couchsurfing, it is teetering dangerously on the brink of complete alienation of its core community. It is ironic to observe that the same fervour that mobilized thousands of volunteers is now channeled into vocal protests against the organization, which is perceived to be dismantling all that is built over the years. A popular article on Bootsnall.com (a website for independent travellers) chronicles an early adopter's initial infatuation with the website and his eventual disillusionment. The article, titled "The End of a Dream - CouchSurfing's Fall", includes these observations:

> "I used to say that Couchsurfing was globalization done right, where ideas and exchange mattered more than money or status. When you met someone who said they were a Couchsurfer, that it meant they had a different viewpoint on life, that they knew how to share, and were culturally open minded.
>
> [...]
>
> Unfortunately, Couchsurfing is no longer that platform, and may no longer even be a good site for travelers anymore, especially women. Will another site emerge? I hope so. We, the community who made Couchsurfing are still there, waiting for the opportunity to transform travel and the world."

This article has been widely shared. Within a month of its writing (May 2013), it has been Facebook "liked" an upwards of 5,900 times, and tweeted 212 times. There have been many such articles online, expressing the disenfranchisement of once-active members, even though CouchSurfing's network has grown by at least 1 million members since its corporatization in 2012. Does the loss of core members matter, considering that new members are joining by the hundreds of thousands? Research into other social networks suggests that the loyalty of relatively small numbers of active members is critically important. Success stories like Wikipedia depend disproportionately on such core members, not only for their many hours of free labour, but more importantly to sustain the organization's core values as it scales up in size. The departure of active members is likely to result in a loss of value from the network. More than an issue of capital injection into an organic community, CouchSurfing's downfall is caused by its failure to listen to its community and its focus on increasing the numbers without working on the essence that made the website so successful in the first place. A case in point is the introduction of Facebook integration which enables people to sign up in seconds, but these profiles also lack important content such as personal descriptions and couch information. These profiles count when one is looking at a general number of 6 million members, but when it comes to browsing a list of hosts to surf with, they are unhelpful.

A community takes time to build, and members should not be viewed as mere numbers. Unfortunately, as we have been shown time and again, the for-profit paradigm often overlooks quality in the pursuit of quantitative growth. A well-built e2f-SNS is one that provides the socio-technical affordances that support and encourage the shaping of narratives of trustworthiness, so that users can achieve the level of trust needed to meet each other face-to-face. A successful one, however, is able to capture the subcultural capital needed to make its community successful, and mold a strong metanarrative so that members can build these narratives with a foundation tied to the common values and beliefs of the community.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Couch Information

(Excerpted from my CouchSurfing Profile at the time of data collection in November 2009)

Couch Available: Yes
Preferred Gender: Any
Max Surfers Per Night: 1

Shared Sleeping Surface: No
Shared Room: No

You will be sleeping in the living room on a spare mattress, or if you don't mind sleeping curled up, you can sleep on the couch. I have a spare quilt and some sheets that you can use.

The living room's pretty spacious and empty at the moment, since we just moved in, it's a public space shared by me and my flatmate but mostly we hang out in our respective rooms.

I live in an apartment at the west of Singapore. It takes about 45 minutes to commute to the city, by bus and by MRT, less by taxi. I have an extra ezylink (now CEPAS) card, that you will be able to use for the period of your stay. You usually have to leave the city by 11pm if you plan to take the MRT back to my place. It should be fine if you're okay with that.

I share the apartment with one flatmate. We don't smoke, and would prefer you not to. We don't have pets.

I'm a graduate student, so my timing is quite flexible, though I try to keep regular office hours. When I'm not too busy I might be able to show you around on weekends. Actually I don't know Singapore that well, so by "showing you around" I mean "getting lost together". It'll be fun regardless =)

I guess two to three nights is the norm.

Note
I'm doing research on CouchSurfing on the topic of Internet and trust, and would really appreciate it if you would consent to be my respondent (which typically involves about one or two hours of talking about your CS experience, which CSers normally do anyway). If you express interest about my research in your email to me it will increase your chances of being hosted ;) Of course, I will explain more when we meet and if you decide not to participate after all, it's ok.

CSers writing interesting and original requests will also be prioritized.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

About the research

This project examines the Internet and trust, using Couchsurfing.org as a case study. The researcher, Tan Jun-E, is a PhD student at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The research project is part of her doctoral thesis. The researcher aims to publish the thesis in article and/or book form.

The researcher would like to interview you and/or obtain information from you as part of this research project. Please understand that there is no pressure on you to participate in this research; the researcher wants your participation only if you genuinely want to participate.

Participant's Agreement

By signing below, I agree that:

I give my voluntary consent to participate in this study.

The research project and my participation have been explained to me and I have had an opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my decision whether or not to participate will not jeopardise my future relations with Nanyang Technological University.

I understand that if I want my identity to remain confidential, the researcher will honour my request. In other words, my name and identifying information will not be shared with anyone besides the researcher, and my name will not be connected with my responses.

I understand that all data collected will be kept confidential, and will only be used for academic purposes.

I understand that tape recordings, if any, will be destroyed within three years of the completion of the project.

Confidentiality (please check one):

_____ I agree to let the researcher use my actual identity. I realize that people who read the completed research project will be able to link my responses to my actual identity.

_____   I would like for the researcher to keep my identity confidential. I realize that the information I shared with the interviewer will be used in the research project, but the researcher will use a pseudonym to protect my identity.

I have read the above form, and, with the understanding that I can withdraw at any time, and for whatever reason, I consent to participate in this project.

Signature of the respondent: _____ Date: _____

Printed Name: _____

Signature of researcher: _____ (Tan Jun-E)

If you have any concerns or questions, please feel free to contact the researcher, Tan Jun-E (june.tan@gmail.com) or her thesis supervisors Assoc. Prof Cherian George (Cherian@ntu.edu.sg) or Asst. Prof Francis Lim Khek Gee (fkglim@ntu.edu.sg).

Appendix C: Interview Questions

First Wave of Data Collection

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. What does trust mean to you?

3. Do you think what you are doing here involves a great amount of trust?

4. How did you start doing couchsurfing? What was your motivation?

5. How did you observe the profiles? What are the details that will project trustworthiness?

6. How was the overall response to your request?

7. What was your goal in mind when you built your profile?

8. What was your first CS experience like? (Progression to learn how to trust)

9. What was your best CS experience?

10. What was your worst CS experience?

11. What do you think is the worst case scenario that could happen when you are CSing?

12. Have you ever met someone who was different from his/her profile? Did it affect your trust towards him/her?

13. Have you heard of any negative incidents on CS before?

14. Do you think the bad experiences will deter you from future CSing?

15. Do you think that CS is getting too big?

16. Do you think CS as a system is adequate to build trust between people from different cultures?

17. Do you think that what you're doing will make a difference at a larger scale?

Second Wave of Data Collection

General Questions

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. Do you think that doing CouchSurfing requires a lot of trust? Why?

3. What do you think are criteria for trustworthiness in CouchSurfers?

4. What do you think are the main reasons that you are able to trust CouchSurfers and host?

5. Why and how did you start doing CouchSurfing? Was it difficult making the decision to host?

Profiles (Preferably conducted in front of the computer)

How do you read profiles (when you are deciding to host)?
6. How important is the profile for you to choose a CS guest? Why?

7. Which parts of the profile are the most important to you? Why?

8. Are there any elements that will add or minus points? Are there any "danger signs" that you look out for? What are they?

9. Do you think that how you read profiles have changed from you first started using the site?

How did you build your profile?
10. Can you tell me more about your profile?

11. When you construct your profile, what are the important considerations to you? Why?

12. Have you made any changes in your profile since you started it?

13. Do you think that your profile is attractive to others? Why?

References

14. Do you have any rules of thumb when it comes to leaving references? Elaborate.

15. Have you ever felt like you wanted to leave a negative reference? Did you? Why (or why not?)

16. Have you seen any negative or neutral references on others' profiles? How did you feel about them?

Requests

17. Which to you is more important (to make the decision to host), the request or the profile?

18. What kinds of requests are the best, and what kinds are the worst? Why?

19. Have you sent requests before? What do you usually write?

CouchSurfing (Hosting/Surfing) Experiences

20. What makes you decide whether to host a person or not? (e.g. free time, vegetarians etc. – for specific cases, not in general)

21. How was your first Couchsurfing experience like? (hosting and surfing) Do you remember how you felt?

22. What was your most interesting Couchsurfing experience? Why was it most interesting for you?

23. Have you had any negative experiences? Why was it negative?

24. Who do you think is more at risk, the host or the guest?

Online and Offline Events and Gatherings

25. Are you active in CS forum groups? Do you think it affects your trust in the system?

26. Do you participate in CS gatherings? Do you think it affects your trust in the system?

27. Do you read profiles of people who attend the same events or forum groups that you do?

Ending

28. Can you sum up why you have the trust to do Couchsurfing?

29. Would bad experiences deter you from doing Couchsurfing? (what is your worst case scenario)

30. Any further comments you would like to add?

Appendix D: List of Respondents

Respondent #	Nationality	Age	Gender
1	Singaporean	18	F
2	Nigerian	34	M
3	American	26	M
4	Swiss	22	M
5	Swiss	26	M
6	Slovakian	26	M
7	Estonian	21	M
8	Indonesian	32	F
9	Brazilian	33	F
10	Australian	31	F
11	Taiwanese	31	F
12	German	25	F
13	Polish	26	F
14	Polish	28	M
15	Polish	29	M
16	Italian	28	m
17	British	30	m
18	Irish	36	f
19	French	40s	m
20	German	40s	m
21	French	29	m
22	French	20s	f
23	Spanish	32	m
24	Dutch	23	f
25	Austrian	55	f
26	Austrian	20	f
27	Portuguese	20s	m
28	German	20s	m
29	Australian	20s	m
30	Austrian	26	f
31	American	20s	f
32	Dutch	24	f
33	Dutch	26	m
34	British	51	F
35	British	50s	M
36	Polish	29	M
37	British	26	M
38	British	71	M
39	American	20s	F
40	American	30	M

*Respondents 1-15 are of the first wave of data collection, and Respondents 16-39 are of the second wave of data collection. Interview 40 was conducted with Casey Fenton, co-founder of CouchSurfing.org
*Some interviews were conducted with more than one people

Appendix E: List of Main Online Sources for Historical Account of CouchSurfing

Note: All of the websites are working as of 16 August 2012 (unless specified)
1. CouchSurfing
    a. Statistics[136]
       http://www.couchsurfing.org/statistics
    b. Finances[137]
       http://www.couchsurfing.org/about.html/finance
    c. News
       http://www.couchsurfing.org/news/
2. Old CS Policy FAQ
    https://docs.google.com/document/pub?id=1SWN1ZcGM-FH2TK-tF6ErwwN-YtL9u0-6IEMsKDSBGfw
3. OpenCouchSurfing
    www.opencouchsurfing.org/
4. Allthatiswrong:
    http://allthatiswrong.wordpress.com/2010/01/24/a-criticism-of-couchsurfing-and-review-of-alternatives/
5. CS Knowledge Base
    https://sites.google.com/site/cskbase/
6. Couchsurfing forums, mostly from
    a. Brainstorm
       http://www.couchsurfing.org/group.html?gid=429
    b. Brainstorm Redefined
       http://www.couchsurfing.org/group.html?gid=7621
    c. We are against CS becoming a for-profit corporation
       http://www.couchsurfing.org/group.html?gid=45507
7. Couchwiki
    a. Volunteer resignations
       http://couchwiki.org/en/Volunteer_resignations
    b. CouchSurfing "conversion" issues
       http://couchwiki.org/en/CouchSurfing_%22conversion%22_issues
8. Casey Fenton's CouchSurfing Blog[138]
    http://blog.couchsurfing.org/casey

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[136]The statistics page has been revamped since mid-2012 and now feature an infographic instead of the original raw data of member demographics and other figures of CouchSurfing activities
[137] This page has been taken down since mid-2012
[138] The blog has been taken down since mid-2012

Appendix F: List of Resignations and Letters

(based on http://couchwiki.org/en/Volunteer_resignations, all links were accessed on 1/3/2012)

#	Volunteer	Resignation date	Role Relinquished	Country	Link to resignation letter
1	Kasper	16/05/2007	Developer	Belgium	
2	Thomas	16/05/2007	Developer	Belgium	A final goodbye http://www.opencouchsurfing.org/2007/05/22/a-final-goodbye/
3	Morgan	16/05/2007	Developer	Canada	And here I go http://www.opencouchsurfing.org/2007/05/15/and-here-i-go/
4	John	16/05/2007	Developer		
5	Midsch	16/05/2007	Developer, Ambassador		
6	Callum (Fired)	22/05/2007	Developer	Scotland	I've Been Fired! http://www.opencouchsurfing.org/2007/05/22/ive-been-fired/
7	Anu	25/09/2007	Developer	Netherlands	So long, and thanks for the fish http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=398153
8	Diederik	13/01/2008	Developer	Netherlands	Casey Love http://www.opencouchsurfing.org/2008/01/16/casey-love/
9	Promitheus	08/26/2009	AMT	Greece	time to go... http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=3687028
10	Flapic	24/09/2009	Ambassador	Italy	[post removed by user] http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=3912524
11	Donna	25/09/2009		United States	Message in the name of Oh Donna !! [posted by Fenix on behalf of Donna] http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=3923400
12	Amanda	27/09/2009	Ambassador		[posted as a message by Margaret M on behalf of Amanda] http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=3930180#post3930531
13	Shai	27/09/2009	Ambassador	India	Goodbye and good luck! http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=3930180
14	BONTOUR*	03/10/2009		Austria	> 5 years of volunteering for CS - what my conclusion is so far... by BONTOUR http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=3981137
15	desaparecida	06/10/2009	Ambassador	Austria	why i quit volunteering for cs http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7621&post=4006320
16	Anick-Marie	07/10/2009		Germany	[untitled, posted as a reply in the forum] http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7621&post=4006320#post4009673
17	Yelyam	20/10/2009	Ambassador	Belgium	Resigning from Ambassadorship http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=4109653
18	FENIX	25/11/2009	Ambassador Support Team	Brazil	Another AST Goodbye http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=4390023
19	Brian	01/12/2009	Verification Team Leader	United States	My Resignation as Verification Team Leader http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=4429632
20	Ricard	01/12/2009	Global ambassador/ Regional	Norway	[post removed by user] http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=4430165

			Coordinator		
21	Roy	03/12/2009	Ambassador	Canada	Resigning as a CS Amb. Happy surfing... http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=4446530
22	Gadget**	09/12/2009	Head of Ambassador Support Team	United States	It has been a pleasure to serve you. http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=2125&post=4493305

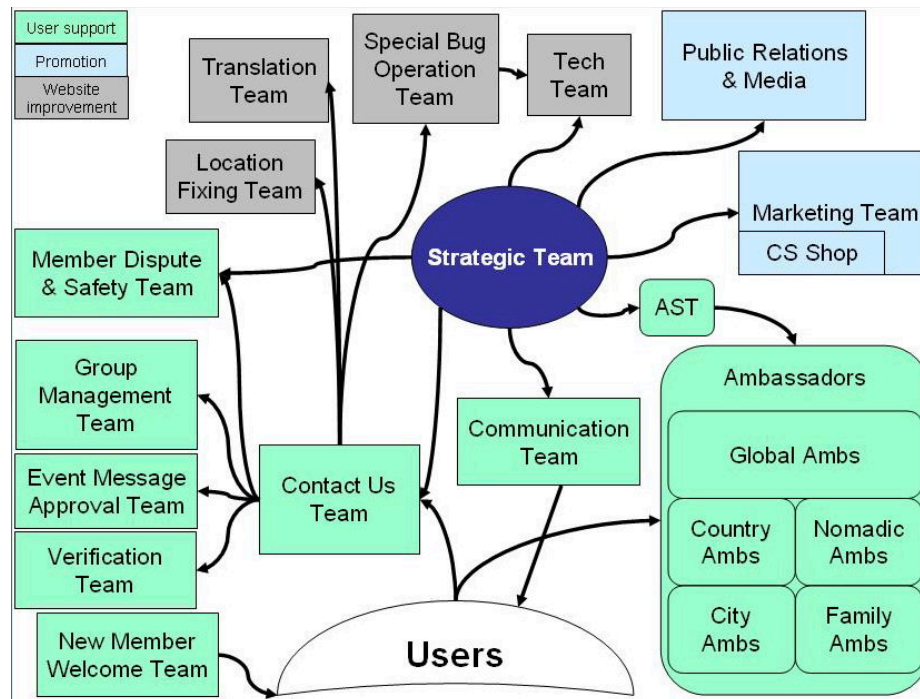*It is not apparent through the letter if a resignation had been given

**I added this entry, which was not in the wiki

Appendix G: Volunteer Structure during the Leadership Team Period
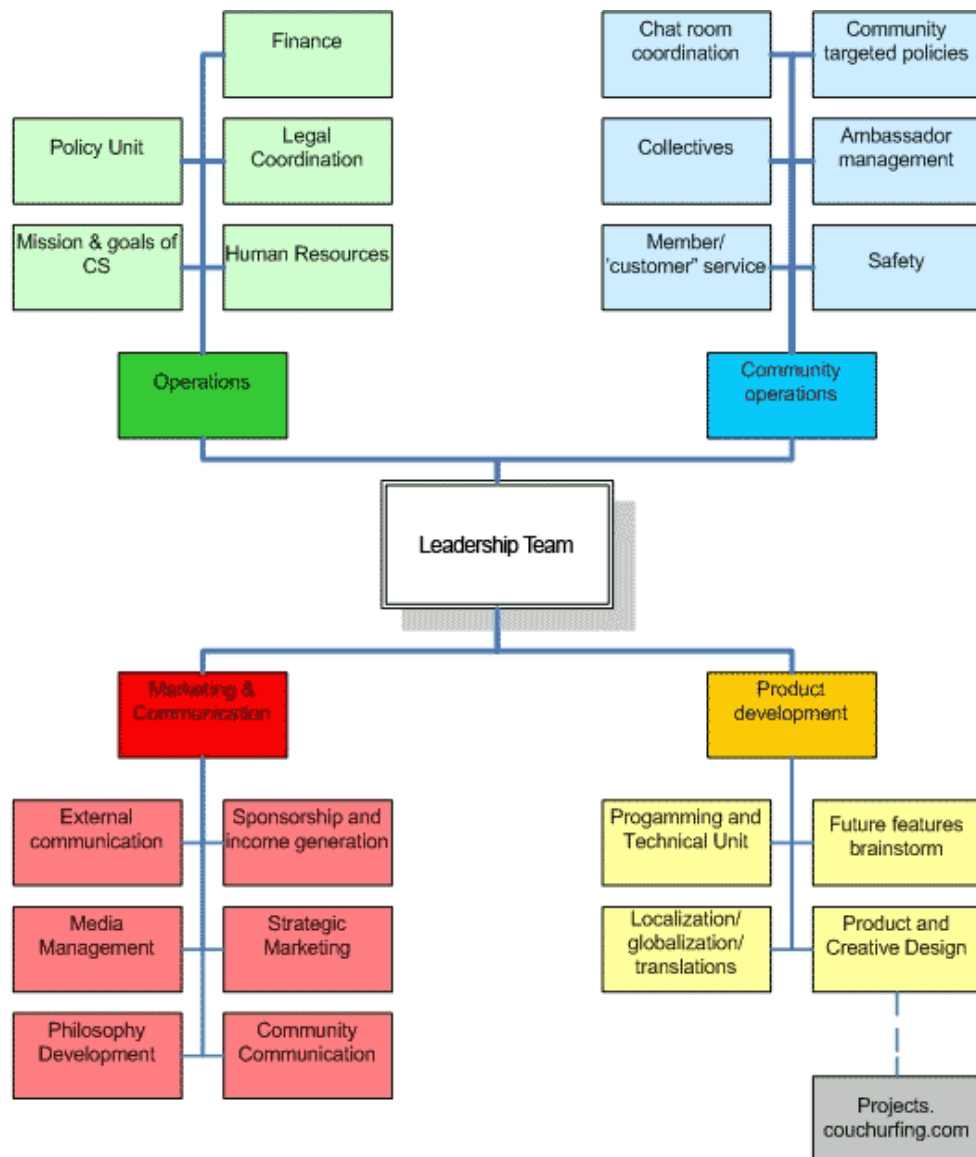
Source: through private communication with a volunteer

Appendix H: Volunteer Structure during the Strategy Team Period

Source: through private communication with a volunteer

	Name of protest/group	Platform	Support	URL
1	Save the Couch$urfing Community	Facebook Page	991 likes	https://www.facebook.com/cslegacy
2	For a strong Community behind CouchSurfing	AVAAZ petition	5,566 signatures	http://www.avaaz.org/en/petition/For_a_strong_Community_behind_CouchSurfing
3	CouchSurfing Legacy Network	Facebook Group	1,244 members	Link unavailable because it is a closed group
4	PROTEST against CouchSurfing: Give us back our local communities and stop censorship. NOW!	Facebook Event	3,523 attending 492 may attend	https://www.facebook.com/events/134863673334252/
5	MIGRATION – From CS to BW – TAKE ACTION NOW!!!	Facebook Event (scheduled for 14 February 2013)	879 attending 370 may attend	https://www.facebook.com/events/378343315592387/
6	The Death of the Couchsurfing Groups	CouchSurfing Event	366 attending, bringing 3283 guests	https://www.couchsurfing.org/meetings.html?mid=175155
7	Give our Couchsurfing Groups back!	AVAAZ petition	1029 signatures	http://www.avaaz.org/en/petition/Give_our_Couchsurfing_Groups_back/?cURfecb

Data collected as of 30 January 2013

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