

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

*'CouchSurfing':
Explorations in Cosmopolitanism, Trust, and Resistance*

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
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in

Sociology

by

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The Dissertation of Josh D. Shapiro is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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2012

For my Nana and Grandpa.
For my Family and Friends.
And
For my Wife.

*“To know someone here or there with whom you can feel there is understanding
in spite of distances or thoughts expressed—That can make life a garden.”*
~Goethe

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Vita

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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This dissertation is based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted via a case study of CouchSurfing.org, a hybrid online/offline hospitality exchange network that enables travelers to locate locals who offer them free accommodation. Chapter one begins with a statistical analysis of CouchSurfers to determine if they hold a cosmopolitan orientation. My analysis incorporates nationally representative samples from 21 different countries, over 1400 CouchSurfers, and 74,000 respondents to the World Value Survey into a single statistical model. My results demonstrate that being a CouchSurfer was the single most important predictor of self-identifying as a global citizen with the world as a whole. Chapter two tackles the concept of trust, which is the glue that holds the CouchSurfing community together. Trust is required to deal with the uncertainty inherent in CouchSurfing. Both trust and trustworthiness are established explicitly and implicitly through multiple elements and layers of the

CouchSurfing process. I came to understand that the development of trust within this network was multi-causal but was largely dependent on a member's perception of familiarity. Each of the CouchSurfing stages identified helps to embed a "familiar world" in the individual members of the CouchSurfing community and describe how trust is then embodied and exchanged in both online and offline settings. Chapter three enters the discussion of the globalization process that fosters questions regarding the detriments and benefits of a shrinking world. By delving into various critiques of globalization from CouchSurfers I will trace the seemingly impervious path of rationalization and disenchantment. However, by also moving beyond CouchSurfers' critique of globalization, this chapter intends to provide an account of how CouchSurfers seem to find freedom and meaning within a world they see ensnared by disenchantment. Taken as a whole, the chapters weave together a narrative of what it means to be a CouchSurfer and elucidate the larger values and worldview of this community. As society changes and adapts to rapid globalization and technological advancements, CouchSurfing offers insights and implications for society.

Introduction

What is CouchSurfing?

CouchSurfing emerged in part as a result of the twin processes of globalization, increased availability and accessibility of travel opportunities, and the technological advances that allowed for the explosion of social network sites via the internet. CouchSurfing on one level is quite simple: it occurs when members of a hospitality exchange network provide living arrangements, generally in their own home and literally on their couch, for other members in the couch-surfing community. The CouchSurfing Project is a free, internet-based, international hospitality service, and is currently the largest exchange network of its kind.¹ The project commenced in 2003 and formally launched on Jan 1, 2004. Members use the website to coordinate contacts and home accommodation ("couch-surfing") with other network members around the world.

However, on another level CouchSurfing is a transnational network on a mission. The mission statement of the CouchSurfing website is to "Participate in Creating a Better World, One Couch at a Time" (CouchSurfing 2009) and goes on to articulate:

CouchSurfing seeks to internationally network people and places, create educational exchanges, raise collective consciousness, spread tolerance and facilitate cultural understanding. We make the

¹ Other hospitality exchange sites include Hospitality Club, Global Freeloaders, Place2stay, Servas International. There are also more specialized exchange networks such as Lesbian and Gay Hospitality Exchange International, Warm Showers (for cyclists), WWOOF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) and many others. However, as CouchSurfing is the largest and most visible of these networks, it will constitute the major case study for this research project.

world a better place by opening our homes, our hearts, and our lives. CouchSurfing wants to change not only the way we travel, but how we relate to the world!

Thus, CouchSurfing aspires to engender meaningful relations across the globe, spreading tolerance, building a global civil society, and even creating a better world. It is a networked community devoted to gaining deeper understanding and knowledge of the local culture, from a local's perspective. By delving deeper into the attitudes, experiences, and world of CouchSurfers, the possibility seeks to enable participants to gain a more complete understanding of the attitudes, agendas, and worldviews of those who participate in this mode of travel, as well as their larger implications. The stories encountered in the CouchSurfing community transcend a utilitarian interest in how best to obtain free accommodation and shed light on deeper social processes regarding cosmopolitanism, developing trust and the search for meaning in travel (and life).

How CouchSurfing Works

Membership in the CouchSurfing organization is free and obtained simply by registering on the website (CouchSurfing.org). The core activity of the organization is exchange of accommodation, although other services include local touring, meeting for coffee, local event gatherings, and local travel advice. Acting as a host, a member offers the possibility of accommodation at his or her leisure; hosting is not required, but obviously it is encouraged. Acting as a surfer (guest), a traveler may search for and request accommodation at his or her destination. Accommodation is entirely consensual between host and surfer, and the duration, nature, and terms of the surfer's stay are generally worked out in

advance to the convenience of both parties. It is also expected to be free; no monetary exchange takes place except under certain circumstances (e.g. the surfer may provide a small gift to demonstrate gratitude).

Who Participates in CouchSurfing and Where?

The most recent statistics on CouchSurfing show that there is a varied demographic with certain commonalities among the majority of surfers.² There are currently over 2,000,000 CouchSurfers in 232 countries around the world, with over 1,000 languages represented. The top destination for CouchSurfers is Paris, France followed by London, England and Berlin, Germany.³⁴ While English is the most common language spoken among CouchSurfers, the CouchSurfing website can be translated into nearly any language and the next most common languages are respectively French, Spanish and German. The male/female ratio of membership is fairly evenly split. There are about 50% male, 40% female and 10% couples and non-identifiers enrolled as CouchSurfing members, which means it appeals fairly equally to men and to women (the site provides no information about transgendered, bisexual, or gay membership). Finally, we can see that the majority of members are young and usually fall between the ages of 18-29 with a majority in the 18-24 range. However CouchSurfers extend all the way up to the age of 89, although there are few at this end of the age spectrum.

Variables of Gender, Sexual Orientation, Race, and Class

² See figure 2 for more detailed demographics on CouchSurfers

³ See figure 3 for a visual map of CouchSurfers by location

⁴ See figure 4 for a visual map of CouchSurfers connection across the globe

While most of these demographic statistics portrayed a community that welcomes men and women of a range of ages, I was interested in unpacking the complex issues regarding gender, sexual orientation, race, and class. While at one point this was to be a major thrust of my dissertation I moved away from these concepts in order to follow a more inductive approach and allow the interviews to be directed by the interests and priorities of my subjects. Although race, gender, and class are traditional foci of sociological investigation, these categories were not necessarily of interest to my subjects, and in fact focus of them, as it emerged, violated some of the basic philosophical assumptions of the CouchSurfing community. While unable to report systematic differences in these particular categories based on the data I collected, below I briefly note issues related to demographic categories of traditional interest to sociologists as they emerged from my interviews and leave it to future researchers to make a more systematic comparison across race/class/gender and other socio-demographic variables.

In fact, perhaps one of my most important findings was the *absence* of discussion of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation during both the interviews themselves and my own experience in the CouchSurfing community. Importantly, on March 5th 2009 in Leeds, UK, a man named Abdelali Nacet raped a woman from Hong Kong who stayed at his place through the CouchSurfing project. Nacet was sentenced to 10 years in prison after being

convicted of this crime⁵. While the CouchSurfing organization publicized the horrific event and added additional safety tips on their website, the community for the most part did not see this as a red flag. Most of my interviews never led to a discussion of gender issues within the CS community, such as possible additional risks to female CouchSurfers or differences in the experiences of male and female CouchSurfers.

A few interviews did provide insights into gender disparities and differences in the community. For example, while I was interviewing Claudia⁶ about her first CouchSurfing experience, she did let me know that, as a woman, she would feel uncomfortable “traveling alone and staying with men. I mean most likely it is ok and the community seems to protect, but who knows, and why should I take that chance.” Other female interviewees said they traveled “differently” by which they meant, as Anita summed up: “We have to be more careful, more alert of our surroundings and the situation we put ourselves in.” However, these comments were the exception and most women, especially experienced CouchSurfers, believed this was not an issue of great concern. When I asked Katherin, a CouchSurfer from Germany, about the rape of the young woman reported in the CouchSurfing community, she said, “Yes, that is a problem, but that is a problem of being a woman, not particular to CouchSurfing. The community is good and I don’t think twice about the gender of the people I

⁵ The Telegraph. “Man accused of raping woman he met on couchsurfing.com website.” <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/6013980/Man-accused-of-raping-woman-he-met-on-couchsurfing.com-website.html>> Accessed 10/2/11.

⁶ All informants in this study were asked if they’d like a pseudonym used and this was done accordingly in the text as well figure 1 of the appendix.

let stay here. There are other factors that are more important.” This was a typical response, reflective of a pervasive attitude that did not see gender or other demographic factors as playing a substantive role in the CouchSurfing community. Partly this lack of interest in variables of race, class, and gender appeared to be the result of CouchSurfers’ deep belief in the mission and ideals of the CouchSurfing community which emphasized commonalities rather than differences among people, but also grew out of members’ experiences on the CouchSurfing circuit where participants stressed an ‘all is one’ philosophy and were reluctant to engage in examining difficult issues and potential conflicts with CouchSurfing.

Additionally, race and sexual orientation were issues I had hope to explore through the lens of CouchSurfing, but was only able to uncover small pieces of information during my ethnography. James, an African-American male who was very active in the gay rights movement in New York, expressed the prevalent CS philosophy regarding race and sexual orientation when he said, “I like the idea that CouchSurfing widens your circle and brings people into your life you would not otherwise meet. And that is true. However I would love to push my boundaries to the extreme as well as that of another. I’d love for a red-neck, racist, homophobic to ask to stay with me. But that will never happen.” This quote expresses a widespread awareness among respondents that while CS provided an opportunity to meet and share time with people from around the world, for the most part everyone participating in this hospitality exchange network had similar values. Partly this is a consequence of those who participate

in CouchSurfing usually having core values similar to those of other members, which inspire them to join the site in the first place. But also, difference can largely be ignored through self selection. Thus, race and sexual orientation recede into the background as familiarity with other members using the site grows.

The last demographic variable of class differences and how it may have influenced ability to participate in the site was also a topic that did not receive as much attention from respondents as I anticipated it would. Democratizing travel as articulated by the CouchSurfing website is an undeniable phenomenon, driven by forces such as easier movement between countries, cheaper transportation, and the ability to obtain lodging free of cost while traveling. Being able to participate in a non-commoditized form of travel such as CouchSurfing provides certainly lowers the financial barriers for those desirous of participating in the travel experience. However, while the entry to participation is lower and CouchSurfing creates a more open system of travel it does not completely erase class barriers. To surf one must have an internet connection. Also, class may influence a person's interest in travel or confidence in their competence to travel. When asked about CouchSurfing Elian from Spain explained,, "It [CouchSurfing] is great. Anyone, anywhere can participate. Well, you need internet, but almost everyone has that." Most CouchSurfers had a similar belief that access in the system was open to all and that anyone who wanted could become involved. In my interviews, there was little or no discussion of the funds needed to actually get to the destination or that knowledge of and access to the CS system still

eluded most people in the world.

In my view, all of these demographic categories were overshadowed by the perceived grandeur of the CS mission and the shared vision of the community. To make the *world* a better place, CouchSurfers needed to assume that “anyone, anywhere” across race/class/gender/sexual orientation can participate in the CouchSurfing phenomenon and does. While this is not entirely true, because of the lack of self-reflection and acknowledgement of these issues within the CS community, my dissertation became focused on what *was* important to this community. Taking an inductive approach led me to follow the stories and topics of CouchSurfers that naturally occurred during my study: issues of global civil society, trust, and globalization.

Research Questions and Chapter Summaries

While much excitement, speculation, and even fear has emerged in the popular press regarding hospitality exchange networks⁷, there has been a dearth of academic and systematic exploration of the motivations, effects, meanings, and processes behind this growing phenomenon. A careful ethnographic analysis will elucidate and provide a greater understanding of this alternative approach to travel in response to the following distinct, yet interrelated questions

- Q1. Are CouchSurfers cosmopolitans and does this represent a shift to a more global civil society?
- Q2. How do participants negotiate and navigate elements of risk, trust, and reciprocity in a globalized era?

⁷ See Gross 2009 <<http://frugaltraveler.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/08/3-cushions-a-million-guests/>>, Halagueña 2008 <<http://showbizandstyle.inquirer.net/sim/view/20081214-177922/Adventures-in-Couchsurfing>>, and Apton 2007 <<http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/story?id=2992689&page=1>> for examples of CouchSurfing in the media.

Q3. Do participants view their actions as resisting globalization's negative tendencies? Do members feel they are successful in this endeavor?

While on the surface these questions may appear distinct, each question is intimately tied to the others. For example, by assessing the global citizen ideology that is expressed on the CS website I will begin to shed light on elements of CouchSurfers' biographies that allow them to be able to trust and accept risks in order to participate. By further examining how individuals participate and connect with others in an authentic way by resisting globalization's anonymous and homogenizing tendencies, I will show how the community believes it is contributing to the creation of a global civil society of meaningful relationships. Each of the above questions is briefly tied to the appropriate chapter below.

Cosmopolitan Orientation of the CouchSurfing Community

Chapter One begins with a statistical analysis of CouchSurfers to determine if they hold a cosmopolitan orientation. Global civil society, and the related concept of cosmopolitanism, has far-reaching implications for contemporary political life. But who is likely to identify as a global citizen and therefore to incorporate the values of a global civil society? That led me to investigate whether CouchSurfers, as members of a hospitality exchange network with the stated goal of promoting tolerance and facilitating cultural understanding, would be more likely to actually have an internationalist orientation. To test this hypothesis, I identified a random subset of CouchSurfers who agreed to complete an online survey and compared results with the World

Values Survey, a pre-existing data set of the world population, to determine if the CouchSurfing group was more likely to display an internationalist viewpoint. My analysis incorporates nationally representative samples from 21 different countries, over 1400 CouchSurfers, and 74,000 respondents to the World Value Survey into a single statistical model. My results demonstrate that being a CouchSurfer was the single most important predictor of self-identifying as a global citizen with the world as a whole.

CouchSurfing represents an intriguing window into a largely speculative and theoretical academic literature on global civil society. While there is a burgeoning number of studies and papers considering globalization and more specifically cosmopolitanism, there is much less reported about the individuals who in fact hold this view. Many academics treat the subject in the abstract informed by utopian visions of a “cosmopolis” or by a universalist ethic. Much research points to the intensification of certain cultural features of world society, and other forms of trans and post-nationalization which are expressions of what is often called *globalization from below* (Beck 2002). While it was beyond the scope of this chapter to delineate the social and cultural dynamics and habitus (Bourdieu, Calhoun et al. 1993) of this transnational community, the importance of setting a boundary and delineating a specific community that self identifies as cosmopolitan will open the door for further research.

This is important since significant changes are taking place in the definition of what constitutes a political community, and in the definition of political and other statuses within it, as well as in the very architecture of

governance (Held 1995: ; Held 2003). The debate about the social morphology of transnational society is instructive in terms of the tensions between communitarians and transnationalists/cosmopolitans. Transnationalization is seen in the growing reach and density of networks and flows: of goods between nations, business and tourism, in the post-national politics of INGOs and cultures of 'organizationalless' transnational corporations. Such interconnections globalize the world in a measurable way, but do so more profoundly because they are redefining the perceptions and experiences of more and more actors.

For communitarians, networks are seen as thin, stringy and inauthentic contexts for identity formation and social intercourse. At best they are instrumental, at worst destructive of real places and identities (Anderson 1991: ; Barber 1996). For communitarians, only rarely are global spaces traversed by true cosmopolitans (and these are to be distrusted), competent trans-cultural travelers, or connoisseurs and lovers of "otherness". Even Ulf Hannerz (1996) cautions that we should not mistake the creation of global spaces for cosmopolitanism, since world spaces are often no more than hyper-space. Here the idea of 'us' refers to palpable communities and the jumble of meanings that bind people to particular places and to the past (Lash and Urry 1994: 316).

To some extent this communitarian imagery demonstrates the continued power of the territorial narrative and the continued appeal of 'real' places. As Robertson and White (2003) suggest, however we choose to define transnational networks, there has been a huge increase in the shift away from local networks of interaction to the national, the international, the transnational, and of course

the global. One index of this development is the growth of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) over the last hundred years (Reimann 2006). The world order is changing from the modern secular model of territorial communities and identities to one characterized by postmodern networks and flows. This is a messy and protracted process, one contested at the level of theory and in practice. Apocalyptic visions of world dis-order collide with more philosophical accounts of Kantian universalism.

Robbins suggests (1997) that in this sort of world where so many modern tenets are under challenge, it is only through negotiating the untidy, compromises between a normative cosmopolitanism and the descriptive cosmopolitanism contained in the less-than-universal, but robust transnationalism of social movements, virtual networks and the like that a sustainable world future is possible. The evidence from the CouchSurfing community points to a radical deterritorialization of social relationships; and at most towards a global civil society. However, I take a more cautious position that the sort of global civil society thus configured looks less like conventional strains of normative cosmopolitanism, and more like a form of a transnational network society (Castells 1996). The importance of this shift will inevitably reshape political, social and cultural ideas of the the world

Trust and Risk

Chapter Two tackles the concept of trust, which as we will see is the glue that holds the CouchSurfing community together. Trust is obviously required to deal with the uncertainty inherent in CouchSurfing. Indeed, many might conclude

that it is the single 'vital ingredient' necessary to enable this community's success. Both trust and trustworthiness are established explicitly and implicitly through multiple elements and layers of the CouchSurfing process. I came to understand that the development of trust within this network was multi-causal but was largely dependent on a member's perception of familiarity. The central question of this chapter is thus, in situations which by definition involve two *unfamiliar* worlds intersecting, how does the CouchSurfing experience create a familiar world, which in turn leads to trust between its members? To answer this question I divide the elements of trust into the following stages: 1) Individual predispositions enable a person to relate to the purpose and mission of CouchSurfing 2) Virtual, on-line trust is next established through navigation on the website 3) Trust, once established online, is then tested and strengthened through in-person interaction, during the hosting or surfing 4) Finally, trust is deepened and solidified by embedding a sense of friendship and familiarity through ongoing online interactions and leaving references for one another. Each of these stages helps to embed a "familiar world" in the individual members of the CouchSurfing community and describe how trust is then embodied and exchanged in both online and offline settings.

Trust depends on one's previous experience with a person or situation and is dynamic and context specific (Abdul-Rahman and Hailes 2000, Luhman 1979, Žiliukaitė 2005). From a holistic level, trust is viewed as fundamental to human society, a critical element to increase cooperation and reduce complexities (Luhmann 1995), and to build social capital (Putnam 2000), among

other important functions. It enables individuals to reach the goals which require collective collaboration and which would not be achieved otherwise. Further, trust also facilitates social interaction and reduces the need for social control and constant supervising of other's actions (Žiliukaitė 2005). In the current globalized setting, the issue of trust becomes progressively complicated as relationships and networks are increasingly diversified across different contexts. New media facilitates interactions and exchanges with the mediation of technology, transcending physical and cultural boundaries.

Researchers generally agree on three types of trust. Interpersonal trust is a trust of one agent towards another agent directly. This trust depends on the specific agents and context. The second type is system trust which refers to trust that is not based on any property or state of the trustee but rather on the perceived properties of the society and its institutions (Gudkov et al.2008). Finally, generalized trust, also referred to as one's "general trust", "basic trust", "impersonal trust", and "universal trust," describes a general trusting attitude, a sense of basic trust which is a pervasive attitude toward oneself and the world. Therefore, it is independent of any party or context (Abdul-Rahman and Hailes 2000). The first two types of trust are most important for relations inside the circles of family, friends or acquaintances and community. It is argued that the importance of generalized trust has increased with the rise of complex, differentiated and anonymous modern societies. In modern societies the individual daily encounters strangers whom he or she must trust in order to conduct daily life; and only a small portion of needed benefit is derived from

strong, intimate personal social relations (Žiliukaitė 2005).

Generalized trust allows people to see other members of a community or society not as enemies or strangers, but as fellow citizens. Generalized trust facilitates cooperation of individuals for mutual benefit in the society. More than other forms of trust, it can be a source of “positive social capital”, since it opens possibilities for communication and collective activity not only among people who are of the same sort, but also among those who are different (Žiliukaitė 2005).

Social networking sites based on hospitality are a new phenomenon that only recently attracted the attention of scholars. Academic topics associated with this trend concern hospitality, tourism, and trust. However, since the hospitality exchange movement lacks any overarching theory, different authors have applied existing network or trust theories to analyses of the phenomenon or have based their studies on original research.

At a methodological level, this study answers Möllering’s (2006) call for more interpretative and qualitative studies on trust. Möllering argues that the methodological strategy employed by trust researchers 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” (Möllering 2006: 152). Also, the significance of the study lies in its focus on an area much

neglected by contemporary research on trust, i.e., trust *online*, i.e. the interpersonal interaction through computer mediation. Much of the research to date looks at trust in terms of e-commerce, which is important in its own right, but I argue that the advent of Web 2.0 and increased interaction among users through social network sites and other avenues justify more scholastic attention paid to how trust develops through interpersonal relationships online.

The interpretative approach taken in my study to tackle the subject of trust is important in that it allows the actors involved in developing relations of trust to articulate what trust means to them. I found that actors define trust as involving familiarity but also the feeling of being accepted as part of the larger, open-minded community. This insight demonstrates an important lesson, i.e., the value of focusing on the actors' interpretation of the social reality in which they live, especially when studying concepts as elusive and abstract as trust (Tan 2010).

Negative and Positive Aspects of Globalization

Chapter Three concludes the data analysis section with a discussion of the globalization process that fosters questions regarding the detriments and benefits of a shrinking world. The closer integration and intensification of worldwide social relations has become a social fact of our globalized era. Within this compression of social relations, technological advancements, and increase in travel, CouchSurfing materialized. By delving into various critiques of globalization from CouchSurfers I will trace the seemingly impervious path of rationalization and disenchantment. However, by also

moving beyond CouchSurfers' critique of globalization, this chapter intends to provide an account of how CouchSurfers seem to find freedom and meaning within a world they see ensnared by disenchantment. How do CouchSurfers construct their actions and participation in this community so as to derive such a strong purpose and meaning from something as mundane as sleeping on someone else's couch? In answering this question, this chapter enters the conversation about a much larger macro-social process of modernity—specifically how technology and a desire to connect authentically could potentially swing the pendulum away from the dire future forecasted by Weber, Ritzer and other critical theorists.

The concept of authenticity has played a prominent role in understanding tourist motivation and experience, and diverse debates and analyses have generated a plethora of literature in this field (Cohen 1988; ; Crang 1996). The center of the debate lies in the meaning of authenticity. MacCannell proposed that “touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experience” (MacCannell 1976: 101). In this view, modern society is inauthentic and alienating, driving people to travel in search of the authentic since “reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere” (1976: 3). But the touristic quest is doomed to failure, he argues, for all there is out there is a ‘staged authenticity’ (Goffman 1963), an inevitable consequence of the commoditization process. A commodity-driven industry underlaid with market capitalism produces a false touristic consciousness and is the epitome of modernity. Postmodernity arrives when true (authentic) meanings

of cultural products and human relations are distorted by the constant reproduction process of signs and images. In this image-driven consumer society, the distinction between original and copy collapses, leaving only hyper-realities and simulacra (Baudrillard 1983).

Much academic scholarship has been based on the premise that the nature of the tourism experience is determined by the displayed objects provided by the industry. But recent studies suggest that tourists subjectively construct their experience by actively negotiating meanings—toured objects being a related but secondary factor (Uriely, Yonay et al. 2002: ; Wickens 2002: ; Uriely 2005). “Objective authenticity” (Wang 1999) presumes there is an undistorted standard to determine what is or is not genuine (authentic). A quest for such authenticity is viewed as a quest for “originals” or for the “truths” that underlie the logic of modernity. In this view, the absence of commoditization (this quality of pre-modern life) helps to determine authenticity. Tourism is an inevitably commodifying process, and the very search itself ruins the authenticity of the object: “The moment that culture is defined as an object of tourism, or segmented and detached from its indigenous sphere, its aura of authenticity is reduced” (Taylor 2001: 15). Empirical research that conceives authenticity in terms of the original, primitive, traditional, and genuine is quite common in tourism studies (Waitt 2001).

However, over the last decade, authenticity in the sense of “original” or “real” has been increasingly refuted by social constructivists, who see

reality as being socially constructed through negotiated meaning-making and agreement (Bruner 1994: ; Hughes 1995). From this perspective, authenticity is subject to cultural selectivity (Halewood and Hannam 2001) and/or interpretation and the hegemonic voices of cultural marketers, scholars, local authorities, and more (Fawcett and Cormack 2001). The concept of “emergent authenticity” contributed significantly to this line of thought, by advocating that authenticity is historically and socially “emergent” rather than static: “a cultural product, or a trait thereof, which is at one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic may, in the course of time, become generally recognized as authentic, even by experts” (Cohen 1988: 379). For the constructivist, authenticity is no longer seen as a quality of the object but as a cultural value constantly created and reinvented in social processes (Olsen 2002).

The research in Chapter 3 argues that the CouchSurfing space is a constructed site of “existential authenticity” as defined by Wang (1999: ; Wang 2000). Participants ‘rebel’ against inauthentic and commoditized travel by the simple act of CouchSurfing. They immediately find meaning in this act that allows them to escape the constraints of modernity and specifically the structure of inauthentic travel. This liberation enables the participants to develop connections and experiences that lead them towards an authentic sense of self rather than being lost in Bauman’s ‘liquid modernity’ (2000). This state of being, characterized in the literature as “existential authenticity”, is experience-based and oriented to the CouchSurfing process. In this sense,

it corroborates Steiner and Reisinger's (2006) discussion of the experience-oriented characteristics of the authentic self and demonstrates Wang's (2000) notion of existential authenticity. By deconstructing what appears to be merely the simple act of sleeping on a stranger's couch, this study offers an important example of the social meaning of tourism. Participation in this community may be understood as a quest for authentic self and human relationships via a socially constructed alternative form of travel.

Taken as a whole, the chapters weave together a narrative of what it means to be a CouchSurfer and elucidate the larger values and worldview of this community. As society changes and adapts to rapid globalization and technological advancements, CouchSurfing offers insights and implications for a possible direction for society. The multifaceted dimensions of this subculture hold clues to understanding larger sociological questions involving cosmopolitanism, trust, and globalization. Thus the conclusions and insights from each of the chapters have implications for other forms of social networking and should be of interest to a wide range of scholars not specifically concerned with the CouchSurfing subculture but attempting to better theorize the ways in which social technology is changing the way citizens of the world engage and develop relationships with each other.

Methods and Orientation:

A major theoretical feature of qualitative research on globalization is the explicit use of multiple settings. Whereas classic fieldwork centered on the intensive exploration of a particular place, such as a village or a workplace, more

recent fieldwork research strategies have been developed to take into account global interconnectedness between people and activities in different locations, both physical and virtual (Holton 2008: 70). The idea of a multi-sited ethnography is most closely associated with George Marcus (1995). Marcus identifies this approach with examination of the 'circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space' (Marcus 1995: 79). This 'mobile ethnography' has gained traction in both sociological and anthropological research repertoires. In one way or another, multi-sited ethnography is 'designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of location' (Marcus 1995: ; Ingold 2000).

This conceptual aspect of chaining and juxtapositions has led Michael Burawoy (2000) to make a strong case for the development of the kind of 'global ethnography' that was employed in the present study. Specifically, the network focus as part of a global ethnography enables richer, more vivid, and more elaborated links to be made between local (micro), regional/national (mezzo), and global (macro) worlds than is available through generalized sociological formulations (Holton 2008). This combining of the local, regional, and global into one dimension has been coined 'glocal' by Robertson (1995) to demonstrate the ability to look at these processes at different levels and collapse them into one dimension. Instead of centering on the problem of the centrality or derivative character of the nation-state, methodological 'glocalism' opens up a more subtle prospect for the analysis of global complexity (Holton 2008) and will also be factored into the present study.

Further, I will be following the general cultural turn in the social sciences which focuses on the symbolic construction of meaning in discourses and narrations and also on a more complete sense of the everyday, which will provide a strong interpretative base for understanding the community under study (Chang and Mehan 2009). Actions become concrete, embodied experiences differing from pure cognitive or rational calculation (Lash 2000) and will explicate individuals' repertoires in the CouchSurfing community through the meaning-making emerging from its narratives. The cultural turn provides us with sensibility regarding moral issues and power relations, especially in the research process, accompanied by ideas of empowering the "research object" and a strong awareness of the researcher's position in the research process. Therefore my methods will favor thick description (Geertz 1973) as well as a rather eclectic use of theorizing in order to go beyond mono-theoretical pitfalls to produce a kaleidoscope of perspectives and explanations (Zinn 2008: 172).

The research is based on both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The qualitative chapters involve a global ethnographic study which follows conventional sociological fieldwork methods of participant observation, as well as incorporating unstructured and semi-structured interviews with 49 selected informants, supplemented by the most currently updated archival and statistical information from the CouchSurfing website. After creating a profile on CouchSurfing.com, I became a participant-observer in the CouchSurfing community by accepting six 'Surfers' into my apartment in San Diego, California during 2008. The Surfers were not chosen because of any particular attributes,

only that I would be available to interview and interact with them for extended periods during the requested dates of their visits. During this time I also attended multiple CS meet-ups to further connect with the community. This involved attending a monthly Ocean Beach bonfire as well as numerous potlucks hosted around the San Diego region. In 2009 I drove across the United States along the 80 freeway from California to New York, stopping for two to four days with CouchSurfers. These CouchSurfers who served as my hosts were randomly selected at regular intervals for sleeping based on geographic proximity to my route. I would query the website for CouchSurfers by city approximately two to three weeks before my estimated arrival. I would send approximately 20 emails to hosts in a given geographic area with usually two to four people indicating that they were free and could host. I would stay with the first person who responded, and with whom I had a compatible schedule. From New York I flew to Switzerland (chosen as it had the cheapest flight to Europe—the other epicenter of CouchSurfing) and started CouchSurfing in Zurich. I took trains all over Switzerland, then continued on to Germany, France and Spain before returning to Switzerland to catch my plane back to the US. I then returned along the southern route—Interstate 40 - CouchSurfing my way home.⁸ The total trip across the United States and through Europe lasted 73 days, during which period which I CouchSurfed every night and day. Throughout my hosting and traveling I took detailed ethnographic fields notes of all observations. I tape recorded and transcribed all interviews with both Hosts and Surfers. Throughout the past three

⁸ For a complete interview list see Appendix 1

years of research I was able to develop relationships as well as attend numerous CS meetings and events, thereby allowing me to develop a more nuanced understanding of the worldview, resistance to globalization, and ways of building and sustaining community prevalent in the CouchSurfing group..

Analysis of qualitative data was facilitated by nVivo software, used to help classify and sort the data with a focus towards addressing my research questions. Common themes were explored and analyzed using an inductive approach that continually compared and analyzed themes across all interviews. Using an “emic” (Ferraro 1998) approach I explored my respondents’ participation in the CouchSurfing community, with the specific lens of motivation toward cosmopolitanism, trust, and resistance. Through open coding, I labeled responses based on elements of my research questions and began the process of categorizing responses across the three themes.

After the majority of the qualitative interviews were completed, I spent six months developing a survey to be administered to a random selection of CouchSurfers across the world. Through my qualitative interviews I had become known in the CouchSurfing scene and thus was able to approach individuals at the CS collective⁹ in San Francisco who put me in touch with the organization’s ‘research division.’ After describing how the data would be used and freely shared with the CouchSurfing community if requested, the research division

⁹ CouchSurfing Collectives (or CSCs) are held in order to bring participants together to improve the CouchSurfing website and grow the community. Participants are volunteers who bring a wealth of skills in order to contribute towards improving the CouchSurfing experience for everyone. Collectives work as the nodes that bring the entire CouchSurfing organization into being and sustain it.

generated a random list from the 2,000,000 members. We began by emailing a link to a survey I had posted online. After receiving nearly 700 responses I still wanted to test whether I could strengthen the statistical significance of my initial findings; fortunately I was able to send my survey to another group of randomly selected members. In the end I elicited 1,482 of the 2,000 CouchSurfers surveyed, yielding a response rate of 74.1%. I decided to focus on a single question regarding cosmopolitanism because it seemed most relevant to the overall study and CouchSurfers themselves.

Without exception, all research is limited in several ways. This dissertation is no exception. There are internal limitations related to methodology choice, the scope of the problem explored and of the applicability of the results. There are external limitations as well, governed by constraints such as time, money, understanding another language, or a change in the structure of an organization being studied. However, to the best of my ability I chose a methodology of deep ethnography and participant observation as well as survey and statistical analysis to try and gain as comprehensive a picture of the CouchSurfing community as possible. While, a more systematic comparison across geography (countries, urban v rural, large v small etc) as well as a comparative historical analysis (CouchSurfing vs. hitchhiking, CouchSurfing vs. those who stay in a hostel, Bed and Breakfast, or hotel) as well as CouchSurfing participants demographics (race, class, gender) would have certainly added layers of depth, the study was limited to including all of these aspects. The methodology was chosen because this was an under-studied phenomenon and little to no academic research was

being conducted when I began my study. Importantly, the research design and results discussed within this dissertation should allow future research to go further in examining these important attributes and comparisons.

Introduction:

For me personally...there's that quote, 'Whether you think the world is out to serve you or get you, you're right.' And so if you approach it with that attitude that this is a community that is wanting to help out and serve, then it will be. I was probably more apprehensive in the beginning than I am now and have more of a faith in people after having CouchSurfing experiences. If someone is willing to open their doors to host a random individual there is something about them that says they have a baseline level of caring and an idea of a global community or global family. The people I've met in CS really have a sense of a global family.

~Peter, 28, CouchSurfer

It's all about community. That's the only change that is going to make a substantial difference. When people join together as human beings and recognize that we are part of a global community and we are not this and that. We separate ourselves so much. We need to realize the importance of combining and not segregating ourselves off for the rest of our fellow human beings.

~Candice, 25, CouchSurfer

With the proliferation of technological developments such as the television, smart phones, the internet, and social technologies, the world has become dramatically smaller. Communication and exchange of information across the globe are now virtually instantaneous. Globalization, according to Robertson (1992), refers "both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" (8). While the phenomenon of global compression has been widely recognized, the difficulty of a world ethos as a site of empirical study has left the latter aspect of Robertson's definition largely speculative and contested. Some scholars predict that identities, following the structural trajectory of globalization, are becoming more worldly (Giddens 1990), a potential manifestation of a rising global consciousness. Others argue that national identities have been dominant since

the formation of a system of nation-states and will remain dominant (Wallerstein 1991). Still others contend that identities are becoming localized in reaction to globalization (Juergensmeyer 2002). Each of these theories understands the critical implications of identity construction on the development of global civil society.

While these contending theories speculate about different trends in the development of global citizens in the general population, I chose a different approach that specifically probes Giddens' (1990) theories about identities becoming more globalized. Specifically, this chapter is motivated by a keen interest in pursuing an in-depth examination of a subset of the general population that according to the website already identify as 'cosmopolitan.' Unlike much of the literature on cosmopolitanism¹⁰ which attempts to envision a path to a future, more united world (Hill; Brennan 1997: ; Robbins 1999: ; Held 2003), I sought instead to understand the geography of cosmopolitanism in those persons who say that they share some sense of belonging to the world as a whole. Moving beyond the philosophical ruminations of cosmopolitanism, I follow in the empirical tradition exemplified by Nye (2000). While many theoretical explications of globalization exist, most do not extend to empirical explorations, specifically who comprises this cosmopolitan global consciousness.

This chapter explores what Beck (2002: 25-26) calls cosmopolitanization, or globalization from within, expressed by respondents who answered questions from the World Values Surveys (WVS) and a duplicate question from my own

¹⁰ For the purposes of this paper 'cosmopolitanism' and 'internationalist' are used interchangeably

CouchSurfing¹¹ study. For the purposes of this paper, cosmopolitans are those who self identify as belonging to the ‘world as a whole’. This is a positive definition of cosmopolitanism, an extroverted, global sense of place (Monk and Massey 1996) which does not necessitate a denial either of local social ties or strong identification with a nation. I intend to demonstrate that members of the subset I chose to study, CouchSurfers, are more likely than a random world sample to self identify as global citizens thereby demonstrating the importance of understanding this community.

This section moves from a discussion of global civil society, through definitions of cosmopolitanism, to theorizing cosmopolitanism and its effects on political life. In the next section of the chapter, I present my hypotheses, data and methodology. The final section of the chapter describes the construction of my statistical model of cosmopolitanism and reports my findings. My analysis incorporates nationally representative samples from 21 different countries into a single model. Because the data are collected hierarchically, with individuals clustered into regions and in turn grouped into countries, the model allows for representations of different concepts of cosmopolitanism across geographic contexts.

Importance of Global Identity and Global Civil Society:

Early modern thinkers did not distinguish between civil society and the state¹². Civil society was a type of state characterized by a social contract that

¹¹ CouchSurfing is the largest hospitality exchange network on the Internet through which individuals coordinate sleeping accommodations via the CouchSurfing website.

¹² It is important to clarify the distinction between the public sphere and civil society. They are

included governance by rule of law based on the principle of equality before the law, in which everyone (including the ruler--as least in the Lockean conception) was subject to the law. In other words, a civil society rested on a social contract agreed upon by its individual members (Kaldor 2003). It was not until the nineteenth century that civil society became understood as something distinct from the state. Hegel defined civil society as the intermediate realm between the family and the state where the individual becomes a public person and, through membership in various institutions, is able to reconcile the particular and the universal (Kaldor 2003). For Hegel, civil society was "the achievement of the modern world--the territory of mediation where there is free play and where waves of passion gust forth, regulated only by reason glinting through them" (Hegel 1955: 3). Hegel's definition of civil society included the economy and was later adopted by Marx and Engels, who saw civil society as the "theatre of history" (Marx, Engels et al. 1978: ; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). The definition of civil society narrowed again in the twentieth century when it was no longer understood as the realm between the state and the family but it occupied the space outside the market, state and family—in other words, the realm of culture, ideology, and political debate (Gramsci 1972).

As civil society is disconnected from the state, it turns outward, developing transnational connections—flows of people, information, and ideas, and the stretching of organizations, identities, and families (Burawoy 2000: 34). With the

closely related concepts--indeed, the intersection between the two is crucial--but the terms are not interchangeable. Civil society refers to non-state actors and organizations (Ehrenberg 1999), whereas a public sphere describes a site of free and open discussion between civil society actors (Habermas 1984)

ease and frequency with which people, goods, and especially information now routinely covers great distances, numerous authors have said globalization changes fundamentally the categories of time and space. The geographer David Harvey calls this "space-time compression" (Harvey 1989).

Durkheim (1964) saw the possibility of a single human society, comparable to the modern day conceptualization of global civil society, beginning with the progression toward the formation of larger societies created out of the economic division of labor. In this modernization schema, "[A]s history unfolds, an organization based on territorial groups (village, town, district or province, etc.) becomes progressively weaker" and "geographical divisions are in the main artificial, and no longer arouse deep emotions within us" (Durkheim 1964: iv). Thus Durkheim came to believe that, over time, local identities would decrease and eventually a global ethos would emerge. According to Durkheim, this increase in social solidarity would be beneficial for all humanity, as people would feel more intimately connected with their fellow humans.

Starting with the radical reduction in telephone fees and the extensive use of electronic mail, a shared immediacy and 'virtual' togetherness has been created among individuals all over the planet, because effective distance is now considerably smaller than geographical distance (Osterhammel and Petersson 2005: 8). The most important cause of this phenomenon is the increased speed of communication combined with dramatically enhanced "reach" of communicative methods (i.e., a person can call or email anywhere others have the equivalent technology).

Another way to express this idea is to refer to 'deterritorialization' or 'supraterritoriality' (Scholte 2000). Location, distance, and borders no longer play a role in many social relationships as they once did. Scholars tend to agree that globalization should not be understood as the intensified interaction among nationally delimited societies, but rather as a trend toward dismantling territoriality and dissolving spatially linked sovereignty—this being the geographic counterpart to interpretations emphasizing the retreat of the state in favor of a bottom up approach of the masses (Osterhammel and Petersson 2005).

Many contemporary academics have become interested in the possibility of global citizenship. Operating within a constructivist theory, Chandler argues that once state actors began to intersubjectively constitute their interests and identities, the focus shifted to the role of transnational and international network activity in establishing and internalizing these new norms (Chandler and Baker 2005: 152). Further, Thomas Risse et al. (1999) argue that the "process by which international norms are internalized and implemented domestically can be understood as a process of global socialization" .

In *The Power of Human Rights*, Risse et al. (1999), analyze 'the process through which principled ideas, beliefs about right and wrong held by individuals, become norms, collective expectations about proper behavior and domestic structure of states' (7). The constructivist argument is that global civil society plays a powerful role in turning ideas (held by individuals) into norms (collective guidelines) and establishing norms as state practice. International society, rather than inter-state competition, is crucial because "while ideas are usually

individualistic, norms have an explicit intersubjective quality because they are collective expectations. The very idea of proper behavior presupposes a community able to pass judgments of appropriateness” (Risse-Kappen, Ropp et al. 1999: 8). These researchers demonstrate the importance of turning individual held beliefs into larger collective norms and setting the stage for the possibility of a global civil society based on world values and behaviors.

Global civil society also revolutionizes the approach to sovereignty as new non-state-based and border-free expressions of political community challenge territorial sovereignty as the exclusive basis for political community and identity (Falk 1995: 100). This challenge from below the nation-state system is increasingly seen as promising nothing less than a reconstruction, or reimagination of world politics itself (Lipschutz 1992: 391). Whether in terms of the democratization of the institutions of global governance, the spread of human rights across the world, or the emergence of a global citizenry in a world-wide public sphere, global civil society is understood to provide the agency necessary to these hoped for transformations (Chandler and Baker 2005: 1).

Optimism about the transformational potential of global civil society is grounded in the view that the nation-state, which long held a central position in the international order, has been increasingly sidelined by new international actors, some of these operating from above, in the form of the growth of new forms of multi-national corporations, but also from below—such as the plethora of non-state individual actors and small group networks that operate on an international level (Chandler and Baker 2005: 2). Kaldor (2003) contends global

civil society represents a 'third force' capable of empowering citizens and possibly transforming the international system itself. For Kaldor, the site of politics itself 'has shifted from formal national institutions to new local and cross-border spaces and this is, to a large extent, the consequence of global civil society activities' (Kaldor 2003: 148).

Kaldor also asserts that global civil society expands the sphere of 'active citizenship', referring to 'growing self-organization outside formal political circles and expanded space in which individual citizens can influence the conditions in which they live both directly through self-organization and through political pressure' (Kaldor 2003: 8). Rather than states being the space for democratic politics, the international sphere is increasingly viewed as the location of 'democratization from below through the articulation of radical and new forms of transnational citizenship and social mobilization' (Grugel 2003: 263). According to Richard Falk, globalization from below extends the sense of community, loosening the ties between sovereignty and community by building a stronger feeling of identity with the sufferings and aspirations of peoples, a wider 'we' (Falk 1995: 89). Thus, according to many theorists, global civil society offers many advantages over the current statist system.

Cosmopolitans to Populate Global Civil Society

Before making the leap into global civil society, it is essential to understand those individuals who self-identify as internationalists, or cosmopolitans and would thus populate such a system. Cosmopolitan writings that speak to a broader need for understanding the development and functioning

of identities, membership, and loyalties in a global context have increased dramatically (Turner 2002: 45). Instead of defining cosmopolitanism as an identification that rejects geography in favor of an abstract and utopian allegiance to 'humanity' (Furia 2005: 338), a geographic cosmopolitanism orients us towards understanding human interdependence in terms of the 'global sense of place' – a sense of place which is extroverted, that integrates in a positive way the global and the local (Massey 1994: 155). Cosmopolitanism is often defined as primarily involving a detached loyalty to humanity and as such is derided as incapable in theory or practice of providing a general platform for political activism. Such arguments are shared by both anti-cosmopolitans and pro-cosmopolitanism critics of Nussbaum's (1996) version of Stoic cosmopolitanism where belief in an essential, universal human rationality is a source of deep, primary attachment extending outward from the individual across concentric social circles to the whole of humanity.

Two main branches of cosmopolitanism are the 'political' and the 'cultural.' Political cosmopolitanism can be traced to the views of Diogenes in the 4th century BCE, who said, 'I am a citizen of the world' whenever someone asked from where he came. By declaring himself to be a world citizen, Diogenes was denying his citizenship obligations to his Greek city-state. Over the centuries, 'communities of fate' have grown to become nations or 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991) that corporealize the social body by means beyond the personal relationships and face-to-face political life of the ancient Greek polis. 'Political cosmopolitanism' gains contemporary relevance through the explicit

construction of a binary opposition between cosmopolitanism and nationalism (Kaufmann 2003). Yet Kaufmann's (2003) analysis finds 'somewhat of a paradox' in cosmopolitanism defined solely as an anti-nation-state orientation.

This version of 'political cosmopolitanism' is critiqued by theorists of 'cultural cosmopolitanism' who are not so quick to discount the possibility that cosmopolitans may retain more localized forms of territorial identity, even national identity (Cheah, Robbins et al. 1998). 'Cultural cosmopolitanism' is the subject of a growing body of literature in cultural and literary studies which shares a broad definition of cosmopolitanism as an openness to, and willingness to engage with, cultural Others (Archibugi and Held 1995: ; Nussbaum and Cohen 1996: ; Cheah, Robbins et al. 1998: ; Breckenridge 2002: ; Appiah 2006: ; Fine 2007). By introverting globalization in his notion of cosmopolitanization, or globalization from within, Beck (2002: 19) defines cosmopolitanism as an acceptance of and willingness to engage with foreign Others.

Massey's (1994) extroverted 'global sense of place' articulates well with the cosmopolitan standpoint, and those who choose to occupy such spaces may collectively be producing something that Marden (1997) calls 'cosmopolitan culture'. However, Marden (1997) may not be correct in holding that identification with a cosmopolitan culture and politics will mean the shedding of 'old' territorial loyalties; rather, these may be nested within more complex forms of identity (Herb and Kaplan 1999).

So who are these cosmopolitans? Central to 'cultural cosmopolitanism' is the notion that cosmopolitans think and empathize beyond their own societies;

that they are tolerant of, generally open to, and even embrace cultural differences (Schueth and O'Loughlin 2008). Scholars further associate generalized social trust with cosmopolitanism. Earle and Need (1995: 103) believe that higher levels of generalized social trust lead to a cosmopolitan society.

Given this proposed connection between cultural cosmopolitanism and openness, tolerance, and empathy, I decided to assess the extent of an internationalistic worldview within a particular community, CouchSurfing, that self-identified as holding an internationalist orientation and compare their values to those of the broader world population. Since CouchSurfing aspires to engender meaningful relations across the globe, spreading tolerance, building a global civil society, and even creating a better world. It is a networked community devoted to gaining deeper understanding and knowledge of the local culture, from a local's perspective. As such, it presents an ideal subset to study as part of an effort to understand what factors promote a global orientation.

Design and Methods:

The hypothesis tested in this research is that CouchSurfers are more likely than the average person to self-identify as global citizens. I addressed the comparative nature of my research question by developing a survey assessing global identity specifically for the CouchSurfing community and comparing responses with those obtained from the World Values Survey (WVS), one of the largest cross-national surveys of world populations. The World Values Survey questions people in the mass publics of 60 societies from over 50 countries

(Inglehart 2000: 8). Wave 3 was conducted between 1995 and 1997 for 54 independent countries of which 51 countries met the criteria for the dependent and independent variables.¹³

To question CouchSurfers about their global orientation, I used a random sample of 2000 users, provided by couchsurfing.org (2010). 1482 of those 2000 CouchSurfers answered the questionnaire yielding a response rate of 74.1%. The study was conducted through an online survey using the EFS Survey tool¹⁴. I questioned CouchSurfers from 91 countries. The main methodological objection to online-surveys is their limited accessibility for all elements of the population under study. However, in my case this drawback was not an issue because all CouchSurfers need to have an active e-mail account to participate in the CouchSurfing network, so all members of the community had equal access to the survey and online capability.

Data Analysis:

The determination of the sample's sociodemographic variables was carried out using standard scales found in other empirical research studies (Friedrichs 1990, Diekmann 2007). My comparative approach required all sociodemographic variables to be controlled for to ensure that I was measuring equivalent constructs. The following four control variables were identical in both the CS and the WV surveys: sex, age, education, income and the Inglehart-

¹³ While Wave 4 and 5 are available, we still used the 3rd wave as our benchmark, because there are no valid cases in the 4th Wave of the WVS for Germany (one of the most important countries for CouchSurfing) and the 5th Wave only contained four countries with valid cases.

¹⁴ <http://www.unipark.info/> (last access: November, 2010).

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To measure the subject's identification as a global citizen I adopted the following question from the WVS: 'To which of these geographical groups would you say you belong to first?' The respondent had the choice between:

1) 'Locality or town where you live', 2) 'State or region where you live', 3) 'Country as a whole' and 4) 'The world as a whole' (Inglehart et al. 2000: 45). We recoded all answers into two categories¹⁶, what I call an 'international view', which consists of identifying the world as the place one feels belonging towards, and the 'non-world view', which contains all other categories such as city, region, or country.

All sociodemographic variables were controlled for in this study. To include sociodemographic variables in the analysis is of great importance since on average a CouchSurfer does not represent the same characteristics as the average person. CouchSurfers tend to be highly educated, young, and usually maintain a lower SES. A merged dataset of the original sample with around 70,000 respondents in the WVS and around 1,400 respondents in the CouchSurfer-Dataset would mislead to a highly selective group, considering that I used the fact of being a CouchSurfer as a predictor. The likelihood of a Couchsurfer having an international world view would be overestimated. To merge the two datasets I drew a 2% random sample out of the World Values

¹⁵ The Inglehart-Index measures via a standard 4-item battery the tendency of being a Materialist or a Postmaterialist. The respondent is asked to order social goals due to their importance (Inglehart et al. 2000: 171).

¹⁶ The answer categories did slightly differ between the countries but not in its extremes (Inglehart et al. 2000: 45).

Survey. By doing so, I gathered a comparable number of respondents in both datasets.

All cases of the CouchSurfing survey were assigned '1' and all cases of the WVS were given a '0'. I calculated cross-tabs and correlations, and ran two regression models. By doing so, I was able to identify whether, as a group, CouchSurfers were significantly more likely to consider themselves as cosmopolitans and part of a global civil society, than individuals who responded to the WVS.

Results:

Table 1 shows the distribution difference between the original datasets of the CouchSurfer and the World Values Survey concerning cosmopolitanism.

Table 1: Crosstab non-world view/international view by CS/WVS

	non-world view	international view
CouchSurfer (N=1482)	60.4%	39.6%
World Values Survey (N=74339)	90.7%	9.3%

Source: Own calculations – original datasets WVS 1995 and CouchSurfing 2009.

90.7% of all WVS respondents indicated that they identified themselves as belonging to a specific geographical group or nation state. Only 9.3% of respondents considered themselves to be global citizens. However, in contrast to the WVS sample, only 60.4% of CouchSurfers had a non-world view while 39.6% primarily identified as belonging to the world as a whole. This univariate analysis shows that CouchSurfers were more likely to have an international view than the

general population. To find out more about the relationship between CouchSurfers, WVS survey respondents, and their self-image as global citizens I also performed a bivariate analysis (See Table 2).

Table 2: Correlations Analysis (Kendalls Tau B)

	Sex	Age	Education Level	Income	Inglehart Index	CouchSurfer
Geographical Groups (international view; non-world view)	.035	-.142**	.093**	-.147**	.262**	.351**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Own calculations – merged dataset.

The results presented in Table 2 show that, apart from the respondents' sex, all included control variables were significantly correlated with the international view. It should be pointed out that all correlations of these control variables were under ($\tau_b = .262$). Only being a CouchSurfer had a significant correlation that surpassed this threshold, with ($\tau_b = .351$). The respondent's value system had the next-highest association with holding an international view ($\tau_b = .262$). Younger people were more likely to endorse an international view ($\tau_b = -.142$), as well as better educated ($\tau_b = .099$) and poorer individuals ($\tau_b = -.105$). However, those correlations were relatively low.

The bivariate analysis verifies the impression that being a CouchSurfer is linked to the likelihood of possessing an international view. Socio-demographic variables have a significant influence, but are not as strongly correlated to the idea of considering oneself as a citizen of the world as simply being a CouchSurfer.

To control for the influence of sociodemographic variables I used a logistic regression model to measure the likelihood of someone considering themselves as a cosmopolitan. In this calculation, the dependent variable was the view, whether non-world or international. The non-world view was the reference group. As predictors I used the sociodemographic control variables mentioned above. While recognizing that these six variables will not explain the origin of an international view, this approach is intended to identify the group or subset of people who consider themselves as a citizen of the world.

Table 3 shows two binary logistic regression models. These models differ in the inclusion of the variable CouchSurfer.

Table 3: Binary logistic regression (international view=1; non-world view=0)

	Model 1 Exp (B)	Model 2 Exp (B)
Constant	.063	.039
Sex	.944	.897
Age	.979**	.991
Education Level	1.468**	1.379**
Income	.893**	.966
Inglehart Index	2.325**	1.744**
CouchSurfer	-	3.090**
Nagelkerke R Square	.165	.201

(N=3026; CS=1482 and WVS=1544)

Source: Own calculations – merged dataset.

Model 1 shows that whether a person is female or male had no significant influence on world view. For every year of lower age, there was a higher likelihood that the individual will have an international view by 3.6%. Educational

level had a significant influence as well. For every rung on the higher education ladder the probability of an international view increased by 46.8%. Individual income level was negatively linked to an international view. A higher income level decreased the probability of an international view by 10.7%. The strongest effect in Model 1 was the value system of the respondent. If the person was a post-materialist it increased the likelihood of having an international view by 132.5%.

After controlling for Couchsurfers – Model 2 – the explanatory power of the model increased from 16.5% to 20.1%. In other words, 20.1% of the variance in international vs. non-world orientation can be explained by these six variables. By controlling for subjects being a Couchsurfer the significant influence of age and income disappears. In other words, the probability of a person having an internationalist outlook is not due to her age or respective income, it is the fact of being a CouchSurfer or not. All other described effects, of education and Ingelhart-Index, remained significant, but the influence of the variable 'post-materialist' decreased from 132.5% to 74.4%. If a subject was a CouchSurfer, the likelihood of this individual self-identifying as holding an international view was 209% greater than for a non CouchSurfer.

Discussion/Conclusion:

This paper has identified a subset of the world population, individuals participating in the social network known as CouchSurfing. Members of this organization are significantly more likely to maintain an international identification than the general population. In addition, I discovered that individuals who were

younger, poorer, and who identified as post-materialist in terms of their value structure were also more likely to conceive of themselves as global citizens.

While academic debates continue regarding whether we are retreating into local communities or opening up to a more global perspective, a large minority of CouchSurfers have already self identified as endorsing the latter orientation. As CouchSurfers Peter and Candice articulated in the opening quotes, seeing oneself as part of a global family and community is of great importance to CouchSurfers. While other factors (age, income, values) correlate to a lesser extent with an internationalist perspective, being part of this transnational community in this study was the strongest predictor of identifying oneself as a global citizen.

What is it about this particular community and the people who comprise it that encourages such a worldview? Based on extensive qualitative interviews with CouchSurfers reported elsewhere (Shapiro 2010; 2011), I conclude that CouchSurfers are travelers with open minds and open hearts, who truly believe people around the world are connected through our common humanity. Nevertheless, many questions still remain as to the precise relationship between Couchsurfing and the development of a global personal identity. Using quantitative methods, this paper demonstrates that CouchSurfers are statistically more likely than average people to identify globally, but many unanswered questions about causal and predictive factors remain. I suggest future research should focus on explaining why one group or community identifies globally while another may not. As more research is conducted in this area we will be able to

identify specific attributes of predisposition and personal sociology that lead an individual to identify with an internationalist perspective. Further, and of greatest importance, future studies need to make clear the links, beyond simple sociodemographic variables, that drive the connection between worldview and cosmopolitanism. We now know there are elements to being a CouchSurfer that lead to a particular worldview, but further refinement of this connection must occur in order to tease out which specific aspects of being a CouchSurfer are driving this correlation.

Stepping into a New World:

Would you let a complete stranger come into the private sphere of your home and stay the evening on your couch? Imagine further that this individual was from a foreign country and your only previous interaction was through the Internet. Or take the opposite scenario: imagine you are the foreigner traveling to a new corner of the world. Would you sleep on someone's couch in a house where you had only a minimal internet exchange? These are not hypothetical questions. They are everyday concerns in the world of CouchSurfing.

As we will see, trust is the glue that holds this community together. Both trust and trustworthiness are established explicitly and implicitly through multiple elements and layers of the CouchSurfing process. This paper was motivated by the following questions: How do participants negotiate and navigate elements of risk and trust from online to offline relationships? What enables and allows initial strangers to establish a high level of comfort and trust with each other in a condensed amount of time? These questions led me to conduct 2 and a half years of field ethnography in which I interviewed 48 CouchSurfers across the United States and Europe and hosted 14 CouchSurfers in my home. Through this ethnographic study I was able to gain a greater understanding of CouchSurfers view of risk and trust. By sleeping on couches, floors, and mattresses from Laramie, Wyoming to Madrid, Spain, I came to understand that the development of trust within this network was multi-causal but was largely dependent on a members' perception of familiarity.

Trust and Risk in Everyday Life:

Bargh and McKenna (2004) describe using the Internet on many occasions as a 'leap of faith.' Purchasing online compared to purchasing over a counter in a store requires a belief that the goods will arrive, that they will be as described on the website, and that your credit card and personal information will not be traded or otherwise misused. If we contact a potential partner via an online dating site, we do not know if this person is really as she or he has described her/himself in the profile or subsequent communication. When we work in virtual teams, or join virtual communities, we take it on faith that the people we talk to are who they say they are (Bargh and McKenna 2004: 97).

In these kinds of scenarios, trust is critical in determining people's behavior. The concept of trust has been studied in many different disciplines, which have generated a large number of potential definitions (Smith and International Conference on Human-Computer; Joinson 2007). However, it is generally agreed that trust is critical when there is a degree of uncertainty (Mayer, Davis et al. 1995). This uncertainty also needs to contain an element of risk (Jones, Vinacke et al.). Without any risk or vulnerability, there is no need for trust (Mayer, Davis et al. 1995).

Mayer et al (1995: 712) define trust as 'the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.' Put more simply, it is the 'willingness to be vulnerable, based on positive expectations about the action of others' (Bos et al

2002: 1). In an interpersonal context, trust can be defined as holding 'confident expectations of positive outcomes from an intimate partner' (Rempel 1987: 188) or 'an expectancy held by individuals or groups that the word, promise, verbal, or written statement of another can be relied upon' (Rotter 1967: 651). Further, Garfinkel (1963) in his seminal work interpreted trust as an activity—a process put into action. People 'do encounters' and thus constantly establish trust in everyday moment to moment interactions (Garfinkel 1967: ; Mehan and Wood 1975). Trust then is put into practice during interaction and not simply a state or simple mindset.

There is general agreement in the academic literature that trust is best conceptualized as multidimensional (Mayer, Davis et al. 1995: ; Bhattacharjee 2002: ; Gefen, Benbasat et al. 2008). In other words, trust is comprised of a number of unique aspects that, while interrelated, are also distinguishable. As, Handy (2000: 46) stated 'trust needs touch.' This reflects the widely held belief that trust between people is poorly established in lean, mediated environments (Bos et al 2002). As an example of a mediated environment, the Internet provides numerous opportunities for people to engage in various forms of deception, ranging from creative self-presentation to the creation of fake identities. In such circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that many commentators view the Internet as a difficult setting in which to build trust.

The essence of trust is a peculiar combination of autonomy and dependency. To trust someone is to act with that person in mind, in the hope and expectation that she will do likewise—responding in ways favorable to you—

so long as you do nothing to curb her autonomy to act otherwise (Ingold 2000). Although I depend on a favorable response, that response must come entirely on the initiative and volition of the other party. Any attempt to impose a response, to lay down conditions and obligations that the other is bound to follow, would represent a betrayal of trust and a negation of the relationship. Trust, therefore, always involves an element of risk—the risk that the other on whose actions I depend, but which I cannot in any way control, may act contrary to my expectations (Ingold 2000).

Much scholarship in the social sciences tends to represent risk as the product of ignorance or irrationality. The modern subject tends to be portrayed in this work as risk-averse and fearful of risk, constantly seeking ways of avoiding it (Lupton and Tulloch 2002). While there has been an extensive literature on people's perceptions of risk, little empirical research has attempted to investigate the meanings given to voluntary risk-taking: that is, risk-taking that is undertaken without coercion in the full acknowledgement that risks are being confronted (Lupton and Tulloch 2002).

Luhmann (1979) believed that “Trust has to be achieved within a familiar world...we cannot neglect the conditions of familiarity and its limits when we set out to explore the conditions of trust.” The central question of this article is thus, in situations which by definition involve two *unfamiliar* worlds intersecting, how does the CouchSurfing experience create a familiar world, which then creates

trust between its members?¹⁷ To answer this question I divide the elements of trust into the following stages which occur in the CouchSurfing process and place them within a theoretical context of how trust is established more generally.

- 1) Individual predispositions enable a person to relate to the purpose and mission of CouchSurfing and must establish a certain comfort with risk to host or visit strangers in one's home, to sign up and become an active user. Thus, a process of self selection occurs at this early stage.
- 2) Trust is next established through navigation on the website. This involves navigation through profiles allowing a user to become familiar with other users, the CouchSurfing Q&A's, and general information and statistics. Reaching out and actually communicating with potential hosts via email and phone further develops trust.
- 3) Trust, once established online, is now tested and strengthened through in-person interaction, during the hosting or surfing. This is where the confluence of risk and trust collide.
- 4) Finally, trust is deepened and solidified by embedding a sense of friendship and familiarity through online interactions and leaving references for one another.

Each of these stages helps to embed a "familiar world" in the individual members of the CouchSurfing community. By breaking up the CouchSurfing process into these five stages, I will be able to demonstrate how trust is established among

¹⁷ While most studies of trust and formulations of the trust concept have been in the everyday world of face to face contact; Couchsurfing and other activities that occur on-line require researchers to expand the conception of trust, which will be further elaborated and articulated throughout this paper.

members around the world in this virtual community. I will use extended ethnographic accounts in order to understand the microprocesses of user navigation, narrative construction, and social interaction that help create familiar worlds. My ethnographic description will move from the moment a new member is introduced to the virtual community through the stage of complete offline immersion and will conclude with how trust is re-embedded online. The practice of CouchSurfing will be outlined in order to understand how a sense of familiarity is created and how trust is then embodied and exchanged in both online and offline settings.

If the CouchSurfing network provides flexible ways of managing uncertainty and maximizing trust, then its methods may offer innovative and useful insights to promote trust in global cross-border and cross-cultural settings, where uncertainty and complexity are considerably more challenging than in less complex local or national settings (Holton 2008: 40). CouchSurfers were chosen for this study as they represent a near-perfect microcosm in which to research decisions about trust that arise in natural settings—based both on individual predispositions and the way CS *stimulates* qualities of trust among members. The interactions of these players are at once simple enough to make them relatively easy to research and rich enough to contain the basic components of risk/trust decisions.

Entry into a Virtual Community:

Hearing about CouchSurfing: Narratives of Risk

I was scared initially, I was at the train station and then I was like

I'm going to get stabbed. I was kinda' cautious because it's a stranger you're going to stay with. But my opinions changed. I'm converted already.

~Zhana, CouchSurfer

CouchSurfing has become an interesting topic in many contemporary social circles. It sounds risky, fascinating, fun and something your mother would surely disapprove of. Knowledge about online communities such as CouchSurfing often travels in two ways: 1) through the media and 2) through one's personal network, especially weak ties (Granovetter 1973). The growth rate of CouchSurfing has seen an explosion starting in 2007. As the mainstream media picked up on this previously underground phenomenon in conjunction with the ability to use Facebook and Twitter to share new and interesting sites, CouchSurfing grew. CouchSurfing has now reached over two million members in only four years.

While anyone can participate in CouchSurfing because it is a free site and activity open to everyone¹⁸, not everyone will want to participate. Individuals who decide to join the site and participate must have certain predispositions: they must accept the CS ideology, including an openness to people they do not know. They must believe people are generally good natured and be willing to trust strangers. And they must see CouchSurfing as not too risky and/or be willing to take that initial risk of signing up and becoming a member. Tolerance of risk, then, is an essential component to taking the first step and deciding to become a CouchSurfer.

¹⁸ There are Socio-economic factors that obviously play a role (i.e. having an internet connection and the means to travel).

"Better safe than sorry" is a well known saying that seems especially applicable in contemporary society with its emphasis on keeping ourselves safe and risk-free. But is it possible or really desirable to live without risk? Wouldn't life be "pretty dull without risk?" (Lupton and Tulloch 2002: 306). What is the price we pay for reducing risks in our striving for safety, security and certainty? (Zinn 2008: 1). As Luhmann (1995: 307) argues, risks have to do with expectations, which can be more or less (un)certain. But what one considers risky depends not only on knowledge but on sociocultural and individual values as well. In some leisure activities, we explicitly seek out risk while simultaneously relying on the safety of the bungee cord or the unfolding of our parachute (Zinn 2008: 9).

This section describes three narratives CouchSurfers emphasized when discussing their initial risk-reward calculations. The first narrative involves emphasizing tolerance of risk (risk makes life worth living) and the second narrative emphasizes trust (low risk because people are good). The final narrative involves describing comfort/knowledge with the internet as a crucial factor in limiting risk and creating trust.

Narrative of Individual Tolerance of Risk

Many in the CouchSurfing community perceived the riskiness of taking that initial plunge into the world of CouchSurfing as a stance against 'not fully living' and needing to take some chances in order to enjoy life. Caitlin and Kieran, a CouchSurfing couple from England, talked about how when they first came to the US they got harassed by the customs officer. The customs officer

asked them, “Where are you staying? You don’t have hotels? You are CouchSurfing? What does that mean? You are going to stay with strangers? People you have never met? That sounds very dangerous.”

Caitlin went on to say,

He just couldn’t understand. Sure, you could stay in a bubble and never talk to anyone and you will be safe, but that is not living. There are certain risks you take everyday and this is a calculated one and well worth it. It’s not like we are hitchhiking. We see the people. We see their references. We know something about them and then we can make an informed decision.

This type of risk-reward calculation came up in numerous other interviews.

Ralphi, a CouchSurfer I met in Germany, believed that “There is a direct relationship between how much risk you are willing to take and how much we want to learn and explore and enjoy life. Everyone has a different comfort level, even within CS, but it is all risk/reward calculations.” In both these statements a life worth living is full of risk and while CouchSurfing is perceived to have some risk, it is well worth assuming given the benefit.

Many CouchSurfers believe they are able to minimize the potential risk, while maximizing the potential benefit. Summing up this position David and Marta, a couple living together in Zurich Switzerland, constructed a narrative of huge reward and such little risk that made CouchSurfing an easy choice. As David articulated,

One there’s risk, I’ve told you before I think it’s low after all these filters. And then there’s the big reward on the other hand. The reward of meeting new people, having very nice, not boring evenings. We both have work, living this not very exciting life...daily routine. And then suddenly people coming. That’s a big reward. People are on vacation, they’re in the holiday mood and we’re not.

But when with them its like a small vacation. Great reward with great peoples. Fun conversation. Very low risk and big reward.

David went on to say:

And at the end of the day we're positive optimistic people...there is good in people. and sometimes we would have bad luck maybe....I could also have a car accident. There is always risk in life. Somebody comes and steals the computer...there's no cash money here. (woman) when you host them, you don't have to let them in your flat when you're not at home. If we meet at the airport and they look strange, creepy, we'd rather not give them the key and so okay we meet in the evening. Have a nice day and you can put your baggage here. But generally we trust people. Never been disappointed of people.

So how do CouchSurfers evaluate the risk they are about to assume? Many CouchSurfers based their calculations on interpersonal reasons. As Jill, a New Yorker articulated, already having a predisposition to take some risk and to be 'an experience junkie' helps in allowing individuals to take the first step to participate in this community. Jill tried to explain to me why she believed some people would never use CouchSurfing and others would.

I think it depends on your experience with the internet. Some people aren't on facebook or myspace and other social networking websites out there. So they don't have the experience of meeting someone virtually and developing a relationship from there. They meet their friends at work, school, or family. That's cool. I do it too but for some reason the experience of meeting someone online intrigues me because you can meet people that aren't in your normal social circle. Its like who knows what special people are out there. And I'm an experience junky. I really like meeting new people and hanging out and seeing what happens. I guess that's what CS people that's what we're looking for looking to meet new people and share stories and have fun. It's something to talk about. Another memory and experience. The people who aren't in it are more cautious because there are risks associated with it. I'm a risk-taker and I guess that's a difference in personality types.

In a similar vein Matt Kocek thought that participating had more to do with being young and therefore willing to take more risks.

Me: Do most people when they hear about CS think it sounds cool or are they weirded out by it?

Matt: 80% of the time they think it's cool. Especially if they are part of my demographic. young. From the city. Finishing college. If I tell someone older like 30 something. They say and you trust these people? Is it safe? That's always the question. Is it safe? But that's not my thought at all. I think you can make it as safe as you want. You can take chances if you want to and don't take chances if you don't want to.

Me: Why the differences?

Matt: I don't know if it's our generation that is more trusting or if it's just an age thing. When we are in our 30's maybe we'll be asking is that safe to some other new thing. When you're in your 20's that's when you're really adventurous. I'm gonna go travel and move out and do new things.

These CS narratives tend to emphasize *the individual* in relation to personal risk reward calculations, being an experience junkie, or simply being young and adventurous. However, following the general cultural turn in the social sciences' understanding about risk and the way in which risk is dealt with and experienced in everyday life, researchers note that risk is inevitably developed via membership in cultures and subcultures, not simply through personal experience.

Narrative of Low Risk Activity

As Tulloch and Lupton (2003) state, 'Our approach to risk adopted a social constructionist position... acknowledging the importance of discourse in the construction of risk epistemologies and in emphasizing that all risk epistemologies are socially constructed, including those of 'experts.' Rather than

drawing a distinction between 'rational' and 'irrational' risk assessments, they prefer to concentrate on the meanings that are imputed to risk and how these meanings operate as part of people's notions of subjectivity and their social relations (Tulloch and Lupton 2003: 1,12). What is considered as a risk, and how serious that risk is thought to be, will be perceived differently depending upon the organization or grouping to which a person belongs or with which he or she identifies (Douglas 1992: 78).

Thus, CouchSurfers continually constructed a worldview in which all other members of the CS community were caring, good and wanting to help. For many this limited the risk being taken. As Peter understood:

For me personally...there's that quote, I don't know it exactly but it says something like whether you think the world is out to serve you or get you you're right. And so if you approach it with that attitude that this is a community that is wanting to help out and serve then it will be. And most people don't go out of their way to build a profile if they have intentions of not using it...If someone is willing to open their doors to host a random individual there is something about them that says they have a baseline level of caring and an idea of a global community or global family. The people I've met in CS really have a sense of a global family.

Peter wanted to believe that everyone in CS was genuine and good. In fact he went so far as to call them his "global family." By constructing the community as a family, in his mind he inevitably reduced nearly any risk he might be assuming by participating.

Vincent, a CouchSurfer from Paris, expressed it this way: The people who participate are very open minded. So there is no problem. Ok, but the first time I received someone I was a bit nervous. Yes. Some friends told me I was crazy

to do that. But I said lets wait and see. In this quote we can see Vincent presenting two different sides of the same experience. At first he wants to simply say that because the CouchSurfing community is 'open' there would never be a problem. However, he still admitted to being 'nervous' and his other circle of friends thinking he was crazy.

Narrative of Comfort with Internet

Finally, a theme that emerged among the younger CouchSurfers was that they were able to feel safe because they knew how to use the internet. This is a generation that grew up with Facebook and Twitter. They believe they know how to assess someone's authenticity and 'what they were all about' from googling them and checking out their other profiles.

As Jill states,

When I tell people about it and they are skeptical and they say aren't you afraid for your safety or some weird guy is gonna try to rape you and I guess that's a concern, but I think we grew up with social networking and the internet. Anyone on CS is probably on the internet pretty frequently and on several different online communities and its just how a lot of us live our lives. It's not for everyone but a lot of us are comfortable getting to know people in that capacity. All my guests are good guests. And you have enough interaction beforehand. You email or message or talk on the phone you get in touch with them and you get a sense if they are ok or creepy. And if they are creepy then you pull the plug. I'm sorry I can't host you something came up.

Jackson and Jordan, a couple living together in Berkeley, California followed up on this idea in the following exchange.

Me: What about the issue of trust? Is that easy for you?

Jackson: You have to screen people first. Look at their profile, check their references.

You just have to go on peoples profile and see if they are cool or not. We've all been on social networks for years. So we can judge

pretty accurately, or at least I can.

Me: Do you think it's a generational thing?

Jackson: Definitely. We grew up with these tools. You can meet someone through Myspace or Facebook and we judge people by their profiles. Most people are pretty genuine. There is room to be deceptive but most people don't have a reason to be. All the interactions I've had have been really genuine. And I don't think if you are looking to deceive someone or steal from their house then you aren't the type of person who would even know about CS. It's still fairly underground. The people on it are just into social networking and traveling.

And for Phibi and Tanya, college students in Reno Nevada, the generational issue was one of the most important factors in their ability to take on the perceived risk of allowing online 'strangers' to come stay with them, as illustrated in the following exchange:

Tanya: The way our generation works now you can just tell so much from a Facebook profile. I can tell what's important to them from what they chose to list to what they don't list in their interests. It's kinda weird how much you can tell about a person from their profile, but it's the way we have developed. I guess I have a good sense of it.

Tanya: It's definitely interesting how trust has developed in terms of different generations. I don't know if it's got easier because of the way we have access through the internet to people's lives so easily. It is developing maybe a sense of knowing. Our privacy is what we make of it of course, but a lot of it is already out for people to become aware of.

Me: what do you mean generationally?

Tanya: Technology plays a huge role for our generation compared to what our parents or grandparents had. A lot of people are more inclined to put their privacy and their thoughts out into the open. I mean it has definitely changed. We have our journals and blogs online of things that need to be censored. Maybe people don't care to be censored anymore.

Phibi: I think it's changed what you expect of a person too. If you meet someone and get an idea of who they are and then look at their Facebook page and see how they present themselves. It makes it easier for you to come into our house but for us to already know something about you makes it a little easier to trust.

In each of these accounts the interviewee gives an interpretation that risk and trust is a generational issue and one that can best be understood by one's comfort with the internet. While media richness theory, which theorizes that the more intimate form of communication used the more trust is built, is still accurate, there is a sense that the relevance of this assumption is waning in the younger generations. Trusting the veracity of self representation and the motives of other members is seen as low risk to those who grew up with the internet and social networking profiles.

The Website: Community, Profiles and Choosing Whom to Trust:

In constructing our personal and cultural understanding of risk we must also understand our construction of trust. As noted, trust always involves an element of risk—the risk that the other on whose actions I depend, but which I cannot in any way control, may act contrary to my expectations (Ingold 2000). Trust also has been thought of as the most effective means of reducing uncertainty and risk. Because trust is a mechanism to reduce complexity and a trait inherent in online transactions¹⁹ (Zinn 2008) it is necessarily a core issue faced by members of the CouchSurfing network. I will now turn my attention to how trust is constructed via the website community, online profiles, and by how a member chooses whom to trust.

Community:

After the initial decision to become a CouchSurfing member, most people

¹⁹ Trust has also been observed to be a major factor in all forms of social interaction Schutz, A. (1962). Collected papers. The Hague, M. Nijhoff..

will go directly to the Organization's homepage: CouchSurfing.com. When a community shares common ideas or goals, a basic level of trust is always present (Zaphiris and Ang 2010). In groups for which trust exists as a 'social reality,' interpersonal trust comes naturally and is not reducible to individual psychology (Lewis and Weigert 1985). The risk for CouchSurfing.com and similar sites is that they could gain a bad reputation--a reputation as an unsafe and risky place to meet people. Negative press and enough negative feedback from others could bring the site into disrepute.

So how does CouchSurfing ensure its good reputation? Boyd (2002) points out that eBay claims its success comes down to its emphasis on community. He writes that 'the rhetorical construction of "community" on the site provides a foundation for the trust between users'. In much the same way, CouchSurfing has set out its community principles: The mission statement of the CouchSurfing website is to "Participate in Creating a Better World, One Couch at a Time" (CouchSurfing 2009) and goes on to articulate:

CouchSurfing seeks to internationally network people and places, create educational exchanges, raise collective consciousness, spread tolerance and facilitate cultural understanding. We make the world a better place by opening our homes, our hearts, and our lives. CouchSurfing wants to change not only the way we travel, but how we relate to the world!

Thus, CouchSurfing aspires to engender meaningful relations across the globe, spreading tolerance, building a global civil society, and even creating a better world. It is a networked community devoted to gaining a deeper understanding and knowledge of the local culture and people, from a local's

perspective. The website's statement of purpose makes clear that CouchSurfing is based on a common purpose and ideology, where the founders believe that opening up one's home to strangers will provide various cultural and educational benefits. While not central to everyone's CouchSurfing experience, the website also allows for local meet-ups, user testimonials, a community manifesto and ideology, numerous documents about safety, suggestions about how to be a good CouchSurfer, and community principles. The site appears to function as a tight-knit community as opposed to a superficial database for connecting random individuals for the instrumental purpose of obtaining a free night's shelter. CouchSurfing.com has gone to great lengths to make this distinction on its website, with the result that many members deeply believe in the community aspect, which in turns allows for interpersonal and community trust to be forged (as we saw above with Peter and his belief in global community).

Relating the concept of community building back to the concept of familiarity and trust came up in numerous interviews with CouchSurfers. As one Couchsurfer from Germany, Anita, articulately stated,

You go in with that trust mentality and through that it increases the trust in the world, that is my personal opinion. I think you go in with the community that idea that you're staying with someone. That this community exists out there and now you have that community and you belong to it. Everything about CouchSurfing feels like 'home.' It just feels right. And that creates a level of instant trust.

The idea that the website and participation in the CouchSurfing process felt like home is a profound statement. For many, taking this leap of faith into the world of CouchSurfing feels quite risky, but even so, many are quickly

comforted by the sense of community building occurring at multiple levels and stages throughout the entire process.

In much the same vein when I asked Candice from Salt Lake City, Utah “What do you enjoy about CS (CouchSurfing)?”, she responded, “It’s all about community. People are joining together as human beings and beginning to recognize that we are part of a global community and we are not this and that. We separate ourselves so much. CS is a community. A network of helping hands. Strangers helping each other and this builds trust and love for your community.

Finally, when I asked Andrea from Switzerland why she felt safe traveling and hosting as a single girl, she claimed that she never felt alone. In fact she believed “Every time I’ve felt very safe and feel like I’m part of a community and not just with one person. They know that they will be judged (by the community) by what I say about them so everyone is careful about treating each other well...and so it (CouchSurfing) attracts good people.” Andrea understood that the CS community both protected her and made her feel safe. She was not traveling alone with a stranger if the entire community was looking out for her best interest.

Profiles:

Creating an online profile is the single most important factor in becoming part of the CouchSurfing community. With a few simple clicks and filling in of personal information and uploading a photo the visitor suddenly “belongs” and is ready to begin surfing or hosting (Zaphiris and Ang 2010). The process of self presentation online is a critically important aspect of relational development

offline. All CouchSurfers must establish an online profile of themselves, and this profile communicates information about oneself that is crucial in creating a sense of knowledge about the other person, which in turn influences familiarity. As Goffman understood in his work on self-presentation, certain individuals may engage in strategic activities “to convey an impression to others which it is in their interests to convey” (1959: 3). Communicating trust is linked to the way we communicate ‘self’ to another user—directly helping the other to familiarize him/herself with who we are (Zaphiris and Ang 2010). CouchSurfing has created many affordances to build up a level of familiarity when creating one’s profile, including the following: personal questions and mission statement, photographs, friendship list, ambassador and vouching, verification, and finally the reference system (each to be discussed in greater detail below).

Researchers have found that on the Internet individuals go about reducing uncertainty by asking more direct, probing questions of the other (Tidwell and Walther 2002). If such probing elicits heightened self-disclosure and reciprocation (Joinson 2001), then a virtuous cycle of hyperpersonal interaction might occur (Walther 1996). CouchSurfing prompts users to take time and fully fill out their profile as this leads to trust among members. The profile includes sections on your philosophy, what you can share with others, what types of people you enjoy meeting and more. Additionally each person also fills in a mission statement—a short statement of why the person travels or who they are at the deepest level—which is one of the first things other members see. Each of these categories to some extent provides the semblance of really knowing

someone at a profound, personal level.

As Sebastian, a CouchSurfer from Germany, articulated, “I like the questions the CouchSurfing website asks. It is not just what movies you like, and general interests. It asks what you can share with others, what is your life mission. These are very personal and you learn more about someone depending on how they answer these questions.” In much the same way, Ellie, a relatively novice CouchSurfer, quickly learned,

So I didn't have any references. And at the beginning my profile was really lame. There was just a single picture, a couple of interests. And when I first like applied to a couch, like nobody responded. And I got a little scared 'cause I didn't have no clue where to stay. And then I worked on my profile for a day, I added a couple of pictures, just gave a little, couple more informations on myself, a little more personal. Suddenly everybody responded. It was magic.

In both these cases, CouchSurfers perceived self disclosure on the website profile as a mechanism to communicate a deep sense of self to others, with the result of being known by other members quite intimately. These questions elicit more than simply what type of job one performs, but get at one's personal belief system and world view. These personal questions communicate a sense of familiarity with other members. Trust in this community is thus based on two separate elements: (1) trust derived from self-disclosure and (2) trust derived from the degree of similarity among users.

The use of photographs is also designed to increase the level of trust at an interpersonal level while simultaneously reducing uncertainty (Whitty and Carr 2006: ; Tanis and Postmes 2007). CouchSurfers are able to upload any number of photos and, as many members described, this can be the single most

important aspect of selecting who to trust. As Prune, a CouchSurfer in Marseille, France, told me, "The picture can talk. I still look at other aspects of the profile. But in my life I have always trusted my instinct and it has worked out and just quickly looking at the picture I feel I know someone." Only 58.1% of members have a photo but nearly 100% of active members have one (CouchSurfing 2010). Profiles with only text and no photos are usually deemed untrustworthy by most CouchSurfers. When I asked Peter if he would host someone without a picture he responded, "Probably not. I want to see what their life is about and who they are and with just text it would be difficult to feel comfortable inviting someone into my home." Further Rob and Anna, an older couple in terms of the CouchSurfing demographic (late 30's), explained that the picture is very important to them. "Since we may be looking for a more quite experience, the type of picture a member selects says a lot. For example, if they have party or drinking photos that is a signal we may not be the best fit, but at least we can tell this before we go."

CouchSurfing also features a 'Friendship list.' Every profile shows a list of other members that a user knows. This list is public and visible to anyone who is viewing another member's profile. A user can easily come to the conclusion that somebody with many friends is more likely to be trustworthy than someone with fewer friends. Further, it should be noted that being in close friendships and relationships to 'ambassadors' (chosen members to represent CouchSurfing) and web site administrators and others who are very involved in the CouchSurfing community can create more trust.

To further the trust-building process there is a 'vouching system' whereby the original members of CouchSurfing 'vouch' for people they know who in turn are able to vouch for people they know. One vouches for those people one believes to be trustworthy (i.e. close friends). Being able to vouch for others implies that the vouching individual has been involved with CouchSurfing for awhile and therefore presumably has developed reliable criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of other CSers.

The process of verification is something slightly different from vouching and involves a four-step process. The member sends his or her credit card information to the website administrators. The administrative team charges the member a maximum of \$25 (sliding scale based on region of the world) and sends him/her a postcard with a verification code(CouchSurfing 2010). The member enters the code and receives a full level of verification. The verification system guarantees that the member lives at the address indicated on the website and that his/her identity is correct. Verification is a controversial part of building trust on the website as many members complain the fee is unnecessary and excludes those who do not have a credit card. However, verification is not a requirement and many members still visit and host those who are not verified. Megan, A CouchSurfer from Ohio, believed that "If someone goes on the site and uses it in ways that aren't honorable it won't really work for them. That network of people won't tolerate it. The whole verification system, vouching and that all correspondence is monitored makes me feel safe and help trust other members. I mean, my mom is one of my friends. So if someone's mom is vouching for

them they must be legit.”

The final trust-building feature and one of the most important on CouchSurfing is the reference system. With the rise of social computing and Web 2.0 sites, reputation systems have spread, such that it is now common to find virtual community systems with rankings for members based on (among other criteria) longevity, number of postings, and (for the highest ranks) a form of peer review. Many of the blog commenting systems now incorporate systems for reader rating of comments (Whitty and Joinson 2009). Reputation systems also provide an important marker for a person's trustworthiness (Resnick, Zeckhauser et al. 2000). The most well known reputation system is that used by eBay. In the eBay system, users leave positive, neutral or negative feedback, plus a short comment, for each transaction. Resnick and Zeckhauser (2001) studied the eBay reputation system and reported that although a very small portion of the feedback they analyzed (less than 300 instances from over 36,000 cases in total) was negative, the feedback did seem to predict the sellers' future success, including the chances their goods would be bought. The implication is that a negative reputation review exerts a powerful influence on those who read it.

The references on the CouchSurfing website are mainly written by other members who have surfed or hosted with a particular user. None of the received references can be deleted, and thus a member is stuck with a negative reference if one is posted. However, according to the website statistics, 99.8% of CS experiences are positive (a topic I will return to later in section IV). Beyond the simple positive, negative, or neutral rating, the user is also able to write a

detailed description or justification of why she or he selected that particular rating.

In general, the profile serves as an introduction and the CouchSurfing website acts as the mediator of this introduction, helping acquaint one person with another and offering various affordances by which members can communicate who they are (Zaphiris and Ang 2010). Over a decade ago, (Dieberger 1997: 807) wrote about dining choices, “The number of cars parked in front of a restaurant is an indication of its popularity as is the length of the waiting line before a theatre.” Similarly, in the world of CouchSurfing the number of photos, friends, references, and travel experiences are indicative of the authenticity and genuineness of other members. As Jackson understood, trust then is built at the confluence of these numerous affordances:

First you have trust in CS and the website itself. What they do to verify their members and the comfort levels that are applied. It starts there with that. By signing on and becoming a member you jump on to that general trust. Then comes trust from your interaction with the person who wants to surf. So, the website provides a good base and you take it from there. However, just because someone is verified and has been on it for 7 years and has 196 friends, it still doesn't mean something isn't gonna happen.

Perusing these pieces of self-disclosure enable a member to construct the puzzle of who another member is, and in large part will determine if the person studying this information feels comfortable choosing to trust the person behind the profile.

Choosing Whom to Trust

After a user builds a profile, she is ready to surf or host. The user can choose a location nearly anywhere in the world and after doing either a simple

search (based only on location) or an advanced search that will only produce members with certain characteristics (i.e. verified, ambassadors, age, language, etc.), will receive a shorter version of relevant members' profiles, containing for each match a picture, mission statement, interests, location, and last login. The user can rapidly glance over the numerous search results until she finds a few profiles that she "likes." She will then send an email through the CouchSurfing 'monitored' email system to request to surf their couch. The host will then receive the request and decide to accept or decline the surfer.

This decision of whom to choose, both as a surfer and a host, is quite subjective but researchers and a number of interviewees acknowledge that it is often based on a sense of homophily— an attraction to those who are similar to oneself (Zaphiris and Ang 2010). Ziegler and Golbeck (2007) explained that dependencies between user similarity and trust exist when the community's trust network revolves around a common goal or particular application and when the individuals trusting each other share similar interests or traits. As Peter responded to how he chooses who to host,

You read up on a person. You look at their pictures. You're making judgments. If they look happy? Who they are with. You are processing this information either consciously or subconsciously. Gathering information about what it's gonna be like to hang out with this person for a full day or to take this person around. Trying to build this person in your mind and sometimes its quick. But in the end you get a sense of would I be comfortable with this person? And usually I find myself more comfortable with those who possess similar qualities. Age, mission in life, spirituality etc.

Similarity instantly connects members to a complete 'stranger' in a way that

makes them feel familiar, and in so doing allows for a sense of trust to be built before any personal exchange has occurred. And as Jill articulated,

I'm gonna be quite comfortable with another 34 year old girl who is into music and dancing and into the same things as me. I'm gonna feel a connection with her because she is a lot like me. The further you get away from me the less comfortable I'll become. I don't think that's prejudice, I think it's just natural. So someone who is twice or three times my age and you know who is a guy who is really into hunting. Maybe we'll get along swimmingly but right away I'm not gonna feel comfortable with someone like that. He is older and no shared interests. Maybe this is someone I wouldn't want to interact with or makes me feel weird. I guess you just go on that. If it's someone I can relate to, even if they are from another country I want someone I can connect with in a certain way.

Thus, while the *convergence* of multiple sources (i.e. picture, numerous friends, and good references) can help create a sense of familiarity, it is only necessary to have a few important features to enable the connection to occur. For Jill, having someone near her age and is 'into music' may be enough to allow a connection of trust to form. However, as many CouchSurfers described, they are open to meeting other types of people who are different from them, but they need something familiar to begin taking that leap of faith. Summing it all up Marina from Switzerland stated, "You get to read the profile so its not just a stranger anymore. You find something. And you connect. Voila."

Meeting (non)Strangers:

Initial Contact

A further method to increase trust in interpersonal interaction is referred to as media switching. Internet relationships tend to follow a similar pattern of initial contact in a public arena, then moving to a private domain (e.g. email, IM),

followed by telephone contact and culminating in face-to-face meetings (Parks and Floyd 1996: ; Whitty and Gavin 2001: ; McKenna, Green et al. 2002). This movement is not only a signifier of trust (I trust you enough to give you my phone number), but also a way in which identities can be established, and the faith shown earlier is rewarded with predictability and, perhaps, dependability (Whitty and Joinson 2009: 101).

Researchers who study media richness might explain the choices to move from chat to e-mail to telephone to face-to-face. This theory proposes that individuals want to overcome equivocality and uncertainty (Daft and Lengel 1986). Rich media are those that have availability of instant feedback, capacity to transmit multiple cues, use of natural language and a personal focus as part of their operation (Trevino et al 1987). According to this theory, face-to-face communication is the richest type of medium as it provides immediate feedback and utilizes more channels. The telephone would be less rich, followed by other types of media such as IM and e-mail. Thus, rich media can help their users get to know others on multiple dimensions more quickly. This multidimensional process contributes to increasing feelings of trust. The social media involved in the CS experience tend to be rich media that facilitate building of trust.

As the above steps describe, in CouchSurfing there is usually quite a bit of contact (website, email, and telephone) before the actual face-to-face meeting occurs. By the time this encounter does occur, most CouchSurfers expressed not a sense of fear but rather one of excitement. As Ellie explained, "I had emailed, IM'ed and then skyped before I came to Germany. When I was heading

out from the train station I was not fearful since I felt like I already knew my hosts.”

The actual visit

The typical guest will stay only a couple of days with a host so the process of getting to know one another is quite different and extremely compressed compared to a ‘regular’ friendship that may take years to fully develop. The level of self-disclosure and sped-up process of familiarization that occurs between CouchSurfers can be directly linked to the “get-acquainted” process that was started online. The design of the website instigates an interaction between strangers in which self-disclosure through one’s profile is the initial method of contact (Zaphiris and Ang 2010). When two individuals meet for the first time, their initial interaction is rarely based on the type of self-disclosure that is commonplace within the CouchSurfing community. Strangers in a casual exchange rarely share with each other their passions, life goals, and types of people they find interesting. Because the design of the website structures a response of relatively high self disclosure online, it encourages the continuation of this familiarity offline. Marcella, a CouchSurfer in Spain, told me, “I think quickly you are trusting the people. It’s like when I arrived, I knew the people for a long time. It’s strange.”

Further as Jackson states, this process of familiarization, while beginning online, takes immediate form offline when he first meets the surfer. In these first real-time moments, Jackson has to decide whether or not he is comfortable and trusting enough of the surfer to leave his key with this person who is both

stranger and not-stranger:

For me it is the idea of leaving the key. It's the feeling you get in the first few moments, when you look them in the eye and talk with them for a bit and then you can say yeah I trust this guy or maybe I should remain on guard. A quick character judgment. It's the vibe you are putting off. I trust my own judgment. I feel like I'm committing to giving that person my trust unless they show me otherwise. That is why I think it is a karma thing. If you show that person trust, more than likely they will not betray your trust and give it back to you. They can but I'd rather not live my life that way. It comes down to a choice how do you want to live your life

Jackson used all the affordances of the website but believes that the real trust is established in the first few minutes of looking into the other user's eyes and exchanging just a few words. From there it is a matter of reciprocal trust building that both sides implicitly agree to follow. "I will continue to trust you (here is the key) as long as you continue to demonstrate you are trustworthy (you didn't steal anything)."

Private Sphere

CouchSurfers often initially meet in public spaces before moving to the private sphere of the home. Partly this is an effort to limit risk but also may have to do with limiting confusion over finding an apartment in a strange city. As the CouchSurfer enters the private sphere of the host's home the trust that began impersonally must now move to the deeply personal. Without the shared structure of the website dictating affordances for appropriate interaction, the offline environment has less interactional structure and the users must socially navigate their making decisions and forming behavior (Zaphiris and Ang 2010). The process of interaction, while negotiated at an individual level, nonetheless

maintains certain structural patterns.

First is the introduction stage where the surfer and host meet in a public place or at the door of the host's home and greet one another. The host usually gives a quick tour, pointing out where the surfer will be sleeping; then they sit down to chat or immediately start touring the host's community/home. The initial verbal exchange usually focuses on CouchSurfing and travel and other simple commonalities. This early stage of familiarization involves low risk and usually lasts for only a short period of time during which each 'stranger' is feeling out the other 'stranger.'

The second stage involves more personal self disclosure. This can take the form of follow up questions to the online profile, but the conversation becomes significantly more individualized, involving experiences, problems, mission and other personal subject matter. This heightened intimacy and self disclosure quickly lead to a growing sense of trust between guest and host. Amazingly, within only a short period of time the guest and host are able to transition from small talk to feeling quite connected and close to another CS member. The private sphere quickly turns into a common sphere where both host and surfer feel comfortable with one another.

Expectations

In everyday face-to-face situations, we rely on contextual cues to determine safety and to minimize the threat of fear, or as Garfinkel described it, 'doing trust' (1967). In the situation of another type of travel—e.g., going to and staying in a hotel—there are elaborate conventions established that reassure us

and make us feel safe. For example, there are barriers between the hotel staff and customers—such as counters when checking in; rooms behind doors that can not be entered except by permission of the guest; deadbolts and other safety devices on the door. There are also standard hotel conventions and rules—such as the pool closes at 11:00pm, towels are available and clean, a do-not-disturb sign can be hung from the door. However, these comforting conventions are not necessarily available in people's homes; so, how do the CouchSurfer and host negotiate these and other dimensions of trust?

Many CouchSurfers adhere to certain norms or unspoken rules that are established by the individuals involved and are pervasive throughout the CS community. While some of these are general and apply to the entire community, there is always an element of personalization and individuality to the particular norms and rules established in each encounter. Even with high levels of social awareness, a difference in behavioral norms based on one's cultural background may create misunderstandings or moments of uncertainty. Since Couchsurfing acts mainly as a conduit to connect and does not regulate every interaction that occurs between individuals, it is largely up to the members to personalize norms of interaction. While these can, and do, vary from member to member, here is an example from Candice from Salt Lake City, Utah describing how she sets forth explicit expectations and a code of conduct on her profile:

Live: Sugarhouse, Utah. A very fun open minded liberal community. This home is gay friendly.

Stay: As for how long you can stay is negotiable. 3 nights is usual but talk to me we can figure things out. I do live with 3 other room mates and anything you can do to give back to them is expected (even if it is

just verbal)... showing appreciation to them is the only way they will keep allowing me to host so many people in our house.

Couch: I have 2 couches downstairs (1 big, 1 small) and one upstairs, your choice. You may also use my washer and dryer while you stay, I can give you enough soap for one load.. if you want to do more please bring your own soap. If you want to crash on the floor as well, be my guest. I do every night...

Please, please be clean and clean up after yourself. Keep your things tidy when you are not using them. Always ask before you use my things, especially in the kitchen. I do have a computer you may use while I am here, otherwise please use the library's internet in downtown salt lake. I don't mind sharing, but be respectful. If you use a lot of one item, replace it.

Smoke: No smoking in the house.

Transportation I live 2 blocks away from the UTA bus stop. Please look up schedules as I can not be your transportation. I may have a spare bike for you to use as well.

Interestingly, as I was interviewing Candice, Shiva her current surfer

interrupted and said,

One thing you did on your profile that I thought was really cool was that you were very specific. You can do a load of laundry and I can give you detergent for one load but after that you have to provide your own. Just giving guidelines like that about what you expect is really wise. It's also about constructing a language in our culture that is really lacking about boundaries. Trying to make it something that is very comfortable and honest at the same time with an integrated communication that would really help a lot. And I think all situations in life where there are two different ideas and people, explicit clarification helps a lot and makes people feel comfortable.

By stating explicit expectations of what the host requires of the guest, a level of trust is established through the guests following these norms. If, for example, Candice's guest decided to do multiple loads of laundry without her permission, this would feel like a betrayal of the rules of engagement and could lead to distrust. If the guest is able to follow the rules, and the host has been honest and also follows the rules then both parties will quickly feel comfortable in the space

they will share over the next couple of days.

Further, in order to quickly establish a sense of familiarity offline, the surfer will take note of how the face-to-face interaction is similar or dissimilar to expectations discussed online. For example, if the situation for sleeping, environment, or items that were negotiated online are greatly dissimilar in reality, this can potentially lead to a feeling of betrayal and a lack of trust between participants.

(Re) Embedding Trust Online:

The final stage of the CouchSurfing project is to return to the website after the face-to-face interaction occurs and add the host or surfer as a new friend or simply use the reference system and rate one's experience. The ranking order is positive, neutral, or negative with space provided for a few descriptive words. While not everyone uses the friendship and review system, it is fairly prevalent within the CouchSurfing community. The CouchSurfing website reports that nearly 99.8 % of people report having positive interactions with their surfers/hosts, however this does not tell the full story.

Anita and Sebastian told me about their one negative experience. Their surfer was "super creepy and weird" and they just didn't like being with him. At the end of our conversation I asked if they left a negative reference and they said "no." As they explained, "He had left such a glowing reference that we could not write back and say something negative so we simply said something short and kept it positive. I did feel there was something fake or wrong about doing it, but it would have been too hard to write something negative."

While this final step solidifies the relationship online and to some extent acts as the “community police,” there seems to be at least some dissociation between how members act and what they actually experience. Nearly everyone who has been on CouchSurfing long enough has had a negative experience. However, they are very likely to not report it. The reasons CouchSurfers gave me for this reluctance to document negative encounters ranged from ‘I didn’t want to hurt his feelings’ to ‘I didn’t want a negative revenge reference.’ As Gary articulated, “People don’t write negative references, they’re too scared to get a revenge reference or something.” However, the review system is thought to keep members safe by reporting problematic issues, and everyone recognizes this fact. However, very few people actually use the system for negative reviews in large part because as a community that wants to live up to the narrative of being kind, open, and helping others, people are invested in believing that everyone is good.

Conclusions:

While much of CouchSurfing is about new experiences and exchange, there is a sense that trust is built through embedding familiar worlds among members. Members, with the help of the site, are able to construct ‘the old’ within this new and uncertain world. To achieve this there must be a recognition that hosts and guests share the same moral universe or at least ‘the construction of a moral universe to which both host and guest agree to belong’ (Tzanelli 2007: 6). Throughout the entire CouchSurfing process members gravitate toward familiar aspects of other members. This enables seeming strangers “to create a

universe from which both guest and host can trust one another" (35).

Thus, rapid and deep trust can be established among CouchSurfers despite its being a mediated environment, if the following conditions are met: a) belief in the essential goodness of human nature b) willingness to assume some risk c) sense of shared community d) ability to establish familiarity from an initial position of strangeness through 1) self-disclosure 2) mechanisms such as friendship lists, vouching, verification, references) 3) and agreed-upon rules. Each of these individual components is interwoven to create deeper bonds between CouchSurfers.

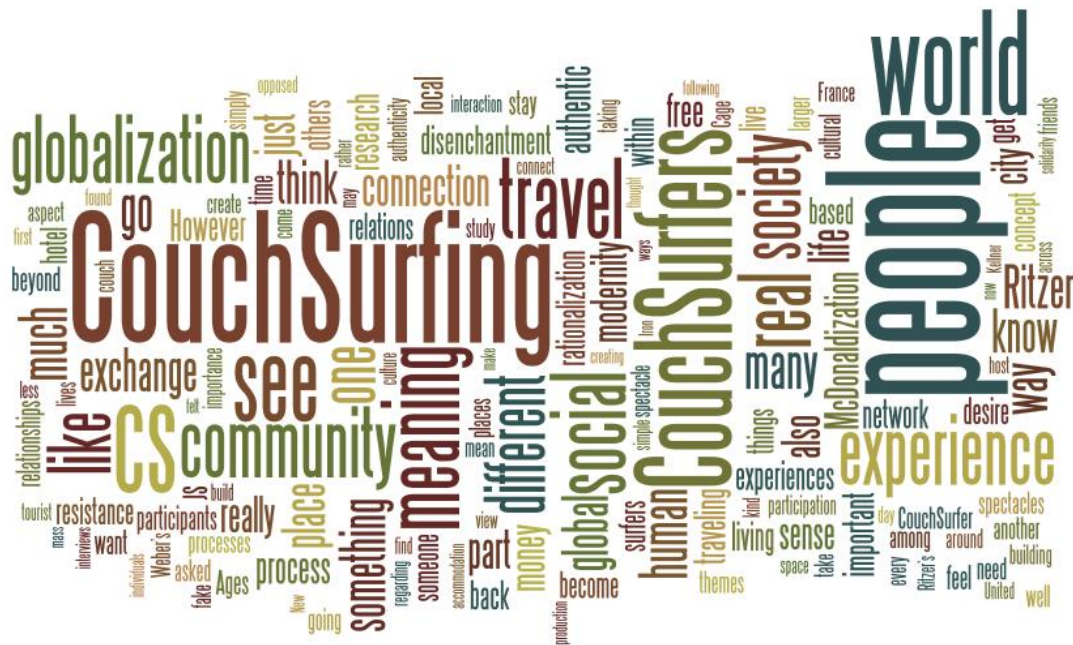
While this study was limited to a single population of CouchSurfers the importance of testing and adapting the insights of how the CouchSurfing community is able to build and maintain trust need to be studied in other communities. Can these underlying processes of CouchSurfing be generalized or adapted to other settings? While this study identified many of the mechanisms involved in the CouchSurfing process, the broader implications regarding familiarization and trust building needs to be better understood.

In the end the CouchSurfing system does an excellent job creating and allowing for trust to be rapidly constructed between members. While the lack of willingness to write negative references is a problem within the CouchSurfing culture, this does not appear to be a fatal flaw. While the website and people promote the construction of community and narratives that everyone is good and looking out for one another are prevalent, there is also the unacknowledged aspect of CouchSurfing regarding negative references. In the end, trust and risk

need a particular mindset and Rob may have summed it up best when he said, “Nothing is perfect and there are always people who will try and take advantage no matter what the mission of the organization is. It is human nature. CS is a reflection of human nature. Good people and bad people. We don’t throw away whole basket because one bad rotten apple. For the most part it is good and the few bad people are negligible.”

Chapter 3

Personal Enchantment Within The Collective Iron Cage: Explorations in 'CouchSurfers' Resistance to Globalization



*“The only way to deal with an unfree world
is to become so absolutely free
that your very existence is an act of rebellion.”*

~Albert Camus

You are hosting people in Paris and they talk about the country they come from and their experiences. And I am here to show them my Paris and my experiences. They get to see how the Parisiens live. Not just what's in a book or the movies. This is very different than meeting and interacting with real Parisiens. When I host people we are going to see my friends, or the suburbs, or get a beer in a small place, not the tourist Champs-Elyse. It is so expensive and not very good. With regular travel you go to your hotel, you see the famous places in the city. But, if you are traveling with CS, you stay with the people, see how they live, and you get to see a different view of the city you are staying. It is not only touristic stuff. You see the real life. You see what they do in the morning. What they do in the evening.
~Vincent, CouchSurfer

There are over 2 million CouchSurfers, like Vincent (above), who feel something is missing when they travel. Many people join CouchSurfing because they are keenly aware that aspects of travel, and more broadly society “didn't feel right.” Something was lacking. Something felt contrived. Somehow they were being manipulated. CouchSurfing, has attempted to create a space *within* society that enables them to derive meaning and purpose without demanding a complete restructuring. There is an optimism and sheer joy in their stories of authentic connection and exchange. They have found something they believe to be ‘real’ within a world they perceive as ‘fake.’

By moving beyond the critiques leveled against globalization, this chapter intends to provide an account of how CouchSurfers, however quietly, seem to find freedom and meaning within a world they see ensnared by disenchantment. How do CouchSurfers construct their actions and participation to derive such a strong purpose and meaning from something as mundane as sleeping on someone else's couch? In answering this seemingly simple question, this paper

enters into the conversation about a much larger macro-social process of modernity—specifically how technology and a desire to connect authentically could potentially swing the pendulum away from the dire future forecasted by critics of globalization.

This paper begins by taking a closer look at globalization, travel, and the use of technology, specifically social networking sites, to explain the origins of CouchSurfing. After a brief introduction to the world of CouchSurfing, I trace the critique of modernity by pointing out the seemingly impervious path of rationalization and disenchantment. Lastly, I will examine the ethnographic data collected from CouchSurfers to explain not only their critique of globalization but, more importantly, how they have found meaning *within* an increasingly alienating world.

CouchSurfing Emerges as a Reaction to Globalization:

The globalization process has brought to the forefront of academic research questions regarding the detriments and benefits of a shrinking world. Longstanding and unresolved debates about economic, social, and cultural questions rage among academics, researchers, and activists alike. Globalization is viewed in many different ways; but whatever definition one subscribes to - “intensification of worldwide social relations” (Giddens 1990: 64), “the compression of the world as a whole” (Robertson 1992: 8), or “the closer integration of the countries and peoples of the world” (Stiglitz 2002: 9) - in each case relationships among people around the world are integral.

Technological advancements have facilitated this “time-space

compression” (Bauman 2000). In particular, Langhorne argues that globalization is the “latest stage in a long accumulation of technological advance which has given human beings the ability to conduct their affairs across the world without reference to nationality, government authority, time of day or physical environment” (2001: 2). Importantly the rise of the internet and in particular social networking sites has connected people across continents and divides in a way unparalleled in history.

Thus one effect of globalization is the increased amount of interaction among people from different backgrounds and cultures throughout a “shrinking world.” Internet tools such as Skype, Facebook, and others help people connect electronically. However, face to face interaction between different cultures usually takes the place of tourism. International tourism became a major mass phenomenon after World War II, embracing the middle and upper social classes in the industrialized, western societies (Scheuch 1981: 1095). Rising standards of living, shortening of the work year, longer paid vacations, rapid improvement in the means of transportation, and most importantly an increase in the motivation to travel facilitate this process (Dumazedier 1967: 129-30; Scheuch 1981: 1094; Young 1990: 30). The increase in international travel has led to a dramatic enlargement of social interaction among peoples of different countries--at least certain classes of them--and thus has become a central topic in the field of globalization and sociological inquiry.

While academics and activists alike stand on both sides of the normative question regarding globalization’s positive or negative effects, specific literatures

in tourism and travel have noted the negative impacts of this intensification of social relations economically, politically, and culturally (El-Ojeili and Hayden 2006: ; Hopper 2007: ; Tzanelli 2007). Scholarly analyses of the “travel experience” are rife with complaints about staged authenticity (MacCannell 1976), homogenization of culture (Ritzer 2008), anonymity of individuals (Bauman 2000), economic/consumer commodification (Berger 2004), and asymmetry in local/tourist relations (Cohen 2004). Further, beyond the travel literature many academics have adopted a macro critique aimed at showing the larger disenchantment occurring in society. Starting from Weber’s Iron Cage (Weber, Gerth et al. 1958) and following Ritzer’s Mcdonaldization (Ritzer 2008) and Bryman’s Disneyization (Bryman 2004) these theorists identify the development of a seemingly impervious path of increasing rationalization, commodification, efficiency and control as globalization proceeds.

However not all theorists take such a pessimistically deterministic view. Tormey (2004) notes the way in which the internet makes marginal groups visible, enables the creation of activist networks, helps coordinate activity, provides alternative sources of information and offers new forms of direct action. Resisting globalization’s negative forces thus emphasizes decentralization, participation, and the notion of a reinvigoration of democracy so as to make it more direct and less distanced and alienated (El-Ojeili and Hayden 2006: 208). One form of resistance to the above critique of globalization and the ‘Iron Cage’²⁰

²⁰ While Weber’s Iron cage refers only to the increased rationalization inherent in social life, I use the term more broadly to encompass Ritzer’s Mcdonalization thesis and the larger issues of disenchantment that ensue.

that addresses people's search for more meaningful forms of travel and intercultural engagement has been the emergence of hospitality exchange networks, of which CouchSurfing is the largest and most general. Seen in this light CouchSurfing can be understood not simply as an organization or a service, but as a social movement that consciously positions itself in opposition to the negative dimensions of globalization noted above.

The CouchSurfing network, while not always explicit about its resistance to globalization, nonetheless positions itself as filling a void that many travelers appear to experience. Placing an emphasis on the local, emphasizing social connections and friendships as opposed to mass tourism, vocalizing a lifestyle choice of how to travel, and taking money out of the equation, CouchSurfing is taking a normative stance on many of the issues raised by globalization. However, before turning to the voices of the CouchSurfing community it is important to review central theorists regarding modernity, globalization, and meaning.

McDonaldization and Lack of Meaning in the Modern World:

Often interpreted as an extension of Weber's "Iron Cage" thesis on rationalization of the Western world, George Ritzer's 'McDonaldization' thesis (Ritzer 2008) concerns the "process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurants are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world." Four main principles of McDonaldization include the maximization of (1) efficiency, (2) calculability, (3) predictability, and (4)

control.²¹ Like Weber, who believes extreme rationalization has a direct effect on meaning—that is, disenchantment—Ritzer argues that the McDonaldization of society creates widespread problematic meanings in people’s lives, of which disenchantment is a part.

The process of rationalization as conceived by Weber became prevalent during the “progressive era” in the United States from the 1860s through the 1920s, when scientific management was introduced, most obviously in automobile factories but also in a vast array of institutional sites, such as education, business, and political administration (Callahan 1962). The popularization of chain fast-food restaurants in the United States (and beyond) epitomizes the spread of scientific management.

But Ritzer’s McDonaldization framework also goes beyond Weber’s theory in important ways. First, the four McDonaldization processes are not merely the guiding principles for production but also become part of the process and experience of consumption according to Ritzer’s theory. Ritzer not only theorized McDonald’s “rationalization” process as a way to produce as much food as possible, but he also explicated the development of an entire culture in which consumers desire efficient, consistent products in large quantity. Secondly, the four processes extend beyond the mass production/consumption of material products to the mass production/consumption of services. It is easy to imagine

²¹ Ritzer breaks down Weber’s concept of *rationalization* into four dimensions (Ritzer, 2008:9-11). *Efficiency* refers to the optimum method for getting from one point to another. *Calculability* refers to the emphasis on the quantitative aspects of products sold and service offered. *Predictability (or consistency)* refers to the assurance that their products and services will be the same over time and in all locales. *Control* refers to “the substitution of nonhuman for human technology.”

that the production of cars can be made more efficient and consistent through the processes of quantification, control, and increased division of labor. The mass production of smiles and friendly attitudes, however, goes beyond increased division of labor and involve the production of standard scripts accompanied by policing and monitoring (or other control mechanisms). Thirdly, Ritzer's theorization of the negative effects of McDonaldization is broader than Weber's theorization of the rationalization trend in the modern world. Weber's main worry about rationalization consists of disenchantment, dehumanization (impersonalization), and meaninglessness. Ritzer adds to that list through his discussion of the "irrationalities of rationality," including the deteriorating quality of education, the spread of obesity from fast food, the degradation of the environment, the creation of legal injustices, the homogenization of consumer choices, and many others. Lastly, Ritzer's theory of McDonaldization is more critical than Weber's theory of rationalization. In his view, powerful people and organizations—often in response to the values and priorities of capitalism—are actively and purposefully engaged in creating these irrationalities.

The main problems of meaning in society resulting from McDonaldization, as identified by Ritzer, are loss of creativity, increasing dehumanization, and progressive disenchantment with the world (see Jensen 2002: 24, 28, 29). Some scholars (Bryman 2004: ; Korczynski and Ott 2004), however, while agreeing with the prominence of the McDonaldization phenomenon, argue that consumers are not as docile and cynical as the McDonaldization thesis portrays them to

be.²² They also argue there is much more enchanting meaning in a consumer society than mere quantity (e.g., big, cheap) (Beardsworth and Bryman 1999: ; Smart 1999: ; Bryman 2004: ; Paulson 2007). In response to these arguments, Ritzer (2008) revises and adds to his previous thesis by stating that quantity is only one of several common forms of consumer appeal. Instead of a linear direction toward disenchantment as a result of McDonaldization, Ritzer now argues for a more complex relationship, in which consumer society is continually re-enchanted by “spectacles.” The concept of spectacles is borrowed from critical theorist Guy Debord. Debord (Debord 1994) argues that contemporary society, with the spread and advancement of media technologies, increasingly is turning into a “society of the spectacle,” in which we see an economy of commodities centering on the production and consumption of spectacles—various abstractions that are divorced from material relations. In this society, abstract images (spectacles) often stand in for the real and shape social relations and consciousness (Kellner 2003, 2005). Because the spectacle is integrated into the economy, social relationships, and consciousness, the spectacle is not

²² For example, a somewhat competing thesis to McDonaldization is the thesis of “Disneyization,” or “the process by which the principles of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world” (Bryman 2004:26). The four main principles involved in Disneyization are: (1) Theming (e.g., theming a café into ‘Hard Rock Café’), (2) Dedifferentiation of consumption (the blurring and implosion of institutional boundaries by merchandises or sites of consumption), (3) Merchandising (turning themes into merchandises), and (4) Emotional labor (the demanded work of outward expression and internalization of certain emotions desired by a themed workplace) (Bryman 2004). The Disneyization thesis disagrees most with the *calculability* dimension of McDonaldization theory. Instead of seeing various theme parks and Disneyized institutions simply as McDonaldized institutions, it often produces very meaningful objects for the consumers (Beardsworth and Bryman 1999: 248-249).

merely “a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people mediated by images” (Debord 1994).

There are many ways to produce spectacles. Ritzer (1999) lists two of the most prominent ways: the creation of extravaganzas (dazzling show and display) and simulations (simulated people, communities, environments). Extravaganzas, which aim to dazzle and impress consumers, can be produced through “legendary stars...huge casts, large orchestras, elaborate production numbers, live animals, blinding light shows, booming sound, ostentatious sets, breathtaking technologies, incredible costumes, daring nudity” and other techniques (Ritzer 1999: 108). Simulation, a concept rooted in the works of Baudrillard (1983), refers to the process of eroding distinctions between the “real” and the “fake,” so that one can hardly distinguish between true and false, real and imaginary. The creation of spectacular fantasy worlds in contemporary society often involves the creation of extravaganzas and simulations. The ever-smiling service workers of Disneyland, for example, are in fact following defined scripts that would fit the “theme” of the environment. The workers are helping to simulate a place in which people are nice, young, welcoming; moreover, by dressing up in Mickey Mouse, Snow White, and other costumes, the workers simulate the fantasy world of children. Ritzer (1999: 104-130) offers other examples, such as themed casinos that import authentic arts in order to simulate museums, themed restaurants that simulate submarines and rainforests, themed gated communities that transplant trees and shrubs to create the illusion of certain rural settings (see also Ryan 2005).

This re-theorization based on Debord's framework helps to lessen the theoretical tension between the original McDonaldization thesis and its critics. In this interpretation, many contemporary corporate institutions qualify as McDonaldized. Rather than exclusively marketing and selling material goods, they mainly market and sell various spectacles related to deep human themes (e.g., truth, eternity, truth, desire, love, happiness), community myths, sensational pleasures, and simulated experiences. When major corporate brands integrate their products into spectacles, it can be argued that they seek to offer extraordinary, pleasurable experiences in guaranteed, efficient, predictable ways to a mass number of people. This phenomenon can be seen as "rationally produced enchantment" (Ritzer 1999: 91).

But the process of producing these enchantments (or happiness) may have serious "irrational" results that paradoxically lead to disenchantment. Concerning human meaning, one such result may be the tendency for spectacles to conquer, replace, distort, and cheapen human themes and "real relations," masking them with a veil (illusion) of meaningfulness. For example, the revolutionary intent of Ghandi and Che Guavara to promote social justice may be cheapened when their images are incorporated into Apple's computer marketing and Revolutionary Soda campaigns. Lastly, in a McDonaldized society where the primary source of enchantment is in spectacles, consumers may believe that they are agents actively choosing commercial products and lifestyles, but they may also feel "dominated" in the sense that they—as well as their fantasies, dreams, pleasures, identities, and values—are controlled, commodified, reified,

and manipulated by corporations—or what Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) call “the culture industry”—that possess massive power to generate cultural representations and shape human meaning.

The contemporary scholars and authors reviewed (Bryman 2004; Kellner 2001, 2004; Ritzer 2008, 1999) are not arguing that consumers are living in *total* domination and hopelessness in this consumer society, at least not to the same extent as depicted by the radical cultural theorists Guy Debord, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, and Jean Baudrillard. With different degrees of optimism and radicalism, these authors see the possibility of social and cultural change based on individual and collective resistance to modernity.

The following ethnographic study listens to the stories and experiences of participants in the CouchSurfing community to understand how they create meaning and authenticity by attempting to resist capitalism’s and globalization’s disenchanting qualities. As will be discussed in detail below CS attempts to embody the reenchantment of the everyday through authentic relations, exchange, and solidarity.

Beyond Inauthentic, Commodified, and Fragmented Life (as told by CouchSurfers):

Through this careful analysis three themes emerged describing participants’ resistance to globalization. Importantly, for the most part, each one of these themes was not trying to radically change the existing social structure but rather to find meaning within it. Each theme thus represents an attempt on the part of individuals, and hence the collective, to find their own way within a

larger system they see devoid of meaning and enchantment. The three themes identified include transformation from inauthentic to authentic, from commodification to exchange, and from fragmentation to solidarity. By delving into each of these three categories we will be equipped to make larger generalizations about meaning making in this community and the larger implications of this NSM based on the theories discussed above.

Inauthentic → Authentic

The most frequent schema CouchSurfers used when asked about their participation in CouchSurfing was the importance of experiencing authentic travel. While authenticity is a nebulous concept that took on personal dimensions for each individual, there was a general sense among those interviewed that travel, and more generally life itself, has become increasingly devoid of authentic interaction and in many ways stripped of meaning. However, the narrative of participants used to describe CouchSurfing seemed to fill a void modernity had created for them.

Nearly every interviewee spoke about how CouchSurfing provided a 'real' experience, contrasting it favorably with 'regular' travel. When asked about why she participates in CS Kim, a college student and part of a CouchSurfing house in Reno, Nevada responded,

There is a big difference between traveling with CS and not. Staying with a local is important because they know the area and the town and the people and they have friends so you can really go out and see *real* Prague or *real* Reno or whatever you happen to do instead of going on the tours where they show you where in 1812 this is where so and so lost their head. That is still cool and you can do it if you want, but CS allows you to see the *real* side of the city which no tour can provide

(Italics mine).

Kim's answer is representative of many others who, when asked about why they participate in CouchSurfing, introduced the concept of what was 'real' and by association what was 'fake.' In only a few sentences Kim mentioned the importance of experiencing the 'real' three times. Further, as the opening quote from Vincent, a 28 year old CouchSurfer from Paris, France introduced the concept of what is 'fake' by first describing the 'touristic' aspects of travel. He creates a dividing line between tourists' (fake) and CouchSurfers' (real) way of travel. Like all respondents who emphasized this distinction, Vincent viewed 'real' as clearly superior in the sense of less expensive, more interesting, and more representative of the lives of the actual inhabitants of the location.

James, an openly gay black man living in New York, articulated this additional value placed on "locals," who are perceived as offering a more enjoyable and worthwhile experience than famous monuments or buildings:

I can read the tourist books, and this is the most cliché, but what I want is the real life of the locals. Instead of going to the sights I'd much rather sit around at someone's home and have dinner with their friends or family and talk to them and their grandparents. It's much more of an authentic experience than going to the Coliseum or the Vatican, which is nice too. I was sad that I was going to miss out on that experience and have to pay the extra money. And true enough I didn't really meet anybody in Rome because I was walking around all day being a tourist. And it's hard. Its harder to meet people when you are "touring." I had one kind of experience there but a very different one in Florence. This guy wrote me and said come to Florence. I hadn't planned on it, but it was only an hour off my route so fuck it let's go to Florence and I had a totally different experience. I did the tourist stuff during the day but in the night he cooked this amazing Italian meal and we talked politics. And that's the kind of stuff you can't get in the books. If I don't know anybody or go to the bars and strike up conversations which I don't really do much, and that was the only piece—I was there a week—that's the pretty much the

only person I met. The guy I surfed with was the only real Italian I had a genuine interaction with. Some of this could have been my fault, I accept responsibility for that, but the point is I get the purpose of what CouchSurfing is about.

To James, as well many other members, having an authentic experience meant connecting with locals. The tourist sites felt artificial and devoid of meaning when they could fill their travel time with hosts' friends and family. It is clear that Baudrillard's concept of the 'spectacle' is no longer satisfying to these CouchSurfers who are not interested in the 'fake' 'touristic' components of travel. 'Real' travel creates a level of authenticity that re-enchants the individual.

When I hosted a couple, Caitlin and Kieran, traveling from England, I gained further refinements on the contrast between 'real' and 'fake' experiences. I asked them, "Why did you decide to use CouchSurfing for your trip to the US?" and Kieran replied,

We wanted to see America for ourselves. We wanted to talk to the people. We wanted to see what it was really like. You can't do this staying in hotels. Yeah, when you are in hotels everyone is nice to you. You have room service. You have comfort. You have safety. You go splash in the pool. Get some room service. Watch a game. Go see the sights. Come back. And relax. I'm not saying this is bad. In fact I enjoy this very much, but it's no way to really learn about the people. How they live. What they do and most importantly what they are like.

In this case, it seemed as though these CouchSurfers perceived comfort as a potential 'golden cage,' enjoyable to be sure, but a barrier to learning about what the local inhabitants are 'really' like, in an unmediated sense of the word. In a similar vein to Weber's Iron Cage, the 'Golden Cage' metaphor demonstrates how luxury, comfort and material goods can easily 'trap' individuals into the

McDonalized 'spectacle' of travel and life. The hotel creates a spectacle of enjoyment, fun, and connection. However, for these CouchSurfers the 'Golden Cage' represents the epitome of the problems of globalization and modernity thereby creating the need for a more 'real' experience.

In the following exchange with Peter, a 28 year old CouchSurfer from Salt Lake City, Utah, he acknowledges this divide between real and fake, and then extrapolates to finding authenticity on a global scale:

P: Yeah, I mean if you go travel and stay in a hotel room you are sectioned off from the culture. It's very sterile. To go live with someone who lives there and see what their life is like and how they live. To celebrate the holidays that they celebrate it's so much more of a cultural experience. Opening up your private life to strangers.

JS: Do you think it's a generational thing?

P: I don't know if it's generational but it's a NOW thing. It's taken time as a whole to open ourselves up to something like this...I don't know...It's almost out of necessity...

JS: What do you mean necessity?

P: People are longing for a connection and there is a globalization taking place. People are aware of the whole earth and so they want to know more about it and connect with other cultures and have a global experience. We do have a global experience. We have things brought in from all over, but people want to have an AUTHENTIC global experience and CS really is one of the places open the doors for this it seems.

JS: What do you mean, authentic global experience?

P: We could go watch a documentary on China about the global experience or hop on the internet and research anything. But until you are there...I think it is a more authentic experience. Smelling the smells, breathing the air. Eating the food. Sitting with the people. Really impossible to find anywhere else than there in the place.

JS: So how is CS different?

P: How is it different with CS? You are living with someone who lives there. Even if you just sat in their apartment all day long you would see what a person does. They get up what they have for breakfast. You really couldn't find that in a hotel or resort or something. And so you get to experience a local's life. And their perspective on the place is so much more powerful than you could read in a guidebook or pull up online. It's from the eyes of someone who has lived there. You also see

them have a rebirth of their fascination of their place which is also very powerful. If someone is excited to share their city with you, you guys exchange this energy together...you see something new and they see something in a new way.

Peter seemed to view his participation in CS as a social movement that has as its organizing principle the goal of drawing the world closer together. CouchSurfing connected him 'authentically' to others and to the world. Interestingly, in Peter's eyes, this global desire to connect with 'the whole earth' also incorporated a stance against modernity. He specifically mentioned the shortcomings of tv and internet, symbols of the information age, in conveying authenticity (while he acknowledged his use of technology with CS, he said it was mainly to connect offline). He wanted to feel his life and his actions were not part of a 'spectacle' devoid of purpose and meaning. His suspicion of technology resembles Kieran's critique of 'comfort' in that both are examples of modernity's iron cage.

Anna, a Russian CouchSurfer described the search for authenticity as follows:

In Russia it is mainly packaged tours. When they go traveling Russians want to step away from poverty. Why would anyone want to go backpacking? The angle changes so much when you do it by choice as opposed to need.

Me: Why rough it as opposed to resorts for you?

A: Resorts are boring. It's all very expected and predictable. You know everything that will happen from the moment you check in. Backpacking is rustic and primitive. Get in touch with nature v. local people. It is spontaneous. I knew what it was to have a challenge growing up in Russia. Makes you re-appreciate things you take for granted. But ultimately it's more of an adventure going with no itinerary is more of an adventure. This is part of it for CS. Everything is a spontaneous situation. Ultimately we learn so much about ourself. An opportunity to see how I'm able to adjust to different personalities and situations. To me it is about self-education. I learn about each visit what I can work on.

For Anna, choosing to travel in this way brings in unpredictable elements, which she desires, and which are in stark contrast to MacDonaldised qualities of efficiency, control, calculability, and predictability. In reaction to modernity's rationalization and efficiency, Anna sought the unexpected. She did not want the simple, rational, predictable existence that the modernity ethos has attempted to create. Instead, she found that spontaneity and unpredictability brought excitement and a feeling that she was living a "real" life.

CouchSurfers often expressed some version of the narrative that it was "not about the couch" or what one did; rather, the experience was about being with real people, in real homes, and having real conversations that were unprogrammed, unpredictable, and the opposite of the scripts modernity has given us. To CouchSurfers, this produced an authentic traveling experience, and more importantly, an authentic "living" experience. Summing up this position was Thomas. He was a CouchSurfer I hosted from France who had always been a traveler. He had been all over the world many times but a year ago found CouchSurfing and felt at home with it. He loved what he called the more "intimate" traveling of CS:

Every hostel and hotel is the same. They look the same. Feel the same. But each home is unique. Each host is unique. It is great to stay and chat and converse with them about anything. This rarely happens with regular traveling. To see the inside of locals' homes. To eat what they eat and go where they go. You can learn so much from what your host's house looks like. How they decorate it. How they live. It is a very interesting part of traveling that without CouchSurfing you would otherwise not encounter.

The importance of simple, everyday activities was highlighted in a

conversation with Candice and Shiva. Shiva had been CouchSurfing with Candice for the last few days when I asked them, “What have you been doing?”

They explained:

Shiva: Candice took me floating down this beautiful river in Utah that I never ever would have experienced otherwise. Just tons of that inside knowledge and local culture and getting to know a place. How people talk and what they talk about is much nicer than a hotel.

Candice: It’s like a square. Going around the tourist attractions. It’s like being able to go somewhere and see what the locals do as opposed to what the tourists do. I could give two shots about what the tourists do. I mean ’ts cool for 10 minutes

S: Yeah, it’s not real. It’s not human

C: So being able to float down a river that you would have never seen makes all the difference in the world.

A simple float trip had become infused with meaning and made “all the difference in the world.” The ordinary, as opposed to spectacle, was what was really human and filled with meaning in a way that a packaged river tour never could be.

Throughout the sample of interviews above, the importance of experiencing the “real” and “authentic” side of travel and connection took center stage for each interviewee. The desire to “know” and connect with the world through authentic experience was an important part of participants’ resistance to globalization and modernity. However, what ‘real’ meant was perceived differently through individual narratives and action. For some it was the value of local people and experiences over “canned” “tourist” experiences. For others it was trying to uncover the “human” element in interactions. And for still others it was leaving room for spontaneity in a rational and calculable world. However one attempted to create a sense of meaning and purpose individually, there was

a collective voice among participants of the need to fill travel and life with meaning they sensed had been programmed and regulated out of their lives.

Commodification → Exchange

At some point during my stays with CouchSurfers in the US and Europe, inevitably someone would exclaim with astonishment that CS was free. I began to realize that this aspect of CS was quite significant in the eyes of participants. Many participants I interviewed connected the concept of a free service to much larger social processes occurring in the world. Throughout the narratives presented below there is a progressively deepening, increasingly sophisticated concept that starts out as simply "saving money;" evolves into creating more sharing, caring relationships based on mutuality, reciprocity, and paying it forward; and in its most radical manifestation, has implications for a "better" way of living (pure, not wasteful).

I met Klaus, a German CSer living in Barcelona, in *Plaza Major*. We walked to the apartment he was renting for the summer. He is a street performer, playing the hang instrument, and survives primarily on tourists' monetary donations. I began our interview by asking him,

JS: "When did you first hear about CouchSurfing?"

K: Um, probably a while back in Germany, but then I never thought about taking this. So it's kind of, I heard about it before but, yeah, long time ago

...

JS: But you didn't get excited and make a profile right away?

K: No, for me it was more like: oh, you know, a free place to stay. That's why initially I thought CouchSurfing was, you know: oh you can go somewhere, you can stay for free. So that's, that's all I knew about it. I never kind of looked into it at any point.

JS: Has your view of CouchSurfing become any different now?

K: [broke into a wide smile] Yeah, yeah, now I've experienced this.

So CouchSurfing basically: you knock on someone's door. And then you step into their lives and quickly build something meaningful.

While Klaus was initially simply attracted by the "free" aspect he quickly began to see the CS network in a new light and learned how meaningful these seemingly simple relationships and interactions became.

Dwayne lived in Laramie, Wyoming and seemed much less cognizant of or committed to the ideals of CouchSurfing compared to others I had stayed with. He was a hunter and an environmentalist (I actually slept under moose antlers from a hunt he had been on). When we first talked about CS and I asked him why he participated, he responded with what appeared to be an instrumental answer focused on financial benefit. However, even this response revealed non-monetary aspects that were meaningful to Dwayne, such as admiring the generosity of the hosts and finding something "super-interesting" and broadening about the experience itself. This quote also suggests a valuing of reciprocity - "I'm giving to those who gave to me":

D: I wouldn't say I'm gung ho about it [CouchSurfing]. I just think if someone is driving across country instead of spending \$120 on a hotel they might as well stay on a couch that isn't being used. It sucks when you're travelling and you have to spend money on a hotel or even if you're camping you have to go to a KOA which is \$45 for the night. I just think its a nice thing to do for people.

JS: Is it more than just the money aspect?

D: It's interesting. It's super interesting. I remember all those people and their names. You learn something you know. I live in the middle of Wyoming and you just don't see many different types of people come through. I personally don't like hostels and in the US they are few and far between, so why reach into your pockets for a hotel when someone can easily put you up. It just makes sense. So I'm giving to people who gave to me at one point.

Tellingly, Dwayne admitted to remembering the names of each and every one of

the people he encountered.

Neither did Megan and Eric, CouchSurfers from Ohio, see the free aspect of CS in an instrumental light, but rather thought of it as an important and necessary transformation our society needs to undergo. As they articulated;

M: I really feel like we're entering an age where people feel we have to do things for each other simply because we have to do them. In order to survive and support each other we are returning to that...like our grandparents' time.

M: I think we are in a time of economic distress and there are certain things we can't take for granted anymore. Basic necessities just aren't a given for so many people and I think we are returning to a time where people understand that and maybe will become a little less consumeristic and more...

E: more compassionate. And couchsurfing is kinda like that.

Much in the same way Peter stated:

I think we need to turn back to taking care of each other which is a different type of exchange. We have been controlled or manipulated through the money game. CS has been one of the primary aspects that has brought me back to the different type of experiences and exchange. A pay it forward type concept. It's like offering something without any expectation of return. Just putting it out there either with or without that if you do good things they will come back to you. Active practice that faith in trust. Good things return.

Megan, Eric, and Peter interpreted the free aspect of CS not simply as an instrumental benefit but as resistance to the commodification and capitalistic relationships they saw all around them in contemporary society. For these CouchSurfers and many others, the importance of re-creating a space of caring and sharing (that possibly once existed and has been lost) is part of their mission and motivation for participating in the CS community.

I stayed with Prune in Marseille, France. She was very poor and literally lived month to month as best she could manage. She had a young son, Seydu,

whom she cherished. Her father was a nomad from Senegal and she believed she inherited his wanderlust spirit. Her philosophy represented the most extreme and coherent position that exchange is a superior way of living, in the sense of being “purer” and “less wasteful.”

If you move you can't forget how big the world is. You see things moving. And you can forget this. You can forget the real things. The essential things. There in front of you all the time. When you have your money you have everything in front of you. You don't every think how will I get this or that. You take it all for granted. You'll think I'm crazy but I'm sure that when I'm really poor I am more free. In America or the richer countries they don't wait when they need something they don't know what this is. People forget why they're working every day because they don't see what they need because they have it before they need it. I don't like money. I like exchange. When you give them something and they give something back to you. Money is dangerous because people work to build things so they can have some money to buy those things to build more and more...but what is it all for? Why are we doing all this? Trading and exchanging for only what you need is much purer and not wasteful than making all this money and buying buying buying...

Prune held strong beliefs about the importance of CS traveling to retain her 'sanity' and how money and the desire to hoard have corrupted the world.

Surprisingly, a wealthier professional couple, David and Marta, who hosted me in Zurich, Switzerland had quite similar beliefs to Prune. When I asked David what he thought about the CouchSurfing Network he stated, “I think it's a great concept of going somewhere and not just visiting places but meeting people and the concept of give and take, not everything has to have a price. It's kinda idealistic, but something important for people to understand that nothing has to be a certain way. We can build relationships and our future however we want it. No money. No problem.” Without any prompting he pointed out how important money was for nearly every interaction or transaction. By ending with

“no money, no problem,” he was stating his belief that money did not have to be the end all-be all that it has become in our society.

These CouchSurfers were convinced that relationships and interactions do not have to be rationalized and commodified as is described in Weber’s Iron Cage or Ritzer’s Mcdonaldization thesis. Instead, as the above examples demonstrate, CouchSurfers have found a “space” of resistance to the domineering tendencies of modernity’s capitalistic growth system. The desire to establish alternative relationships and transactions based on kindness and exchange contrasts sharply with everyday market forces and provides the CS community with the hope of finding meaning and connection within the larger global capitalistic ideology.

Fragmentation → Solidarity

Throughout my experience with CouchSurfing a persistent theme emerged regarding how even in large cities, with an abundance of social activities and throngs of people, there was still a sense of being disconnected from fellow human beings, especially when traveling. By contrast, CS appeared to link participants to others, in a sense creating a meaningful, partially transient but highly social, community. Elaborating on this communitarian theme, interviewees identified a continuum from creating global community and friendships, to connecting through kindness and finding similarity, to more generally emphasizing people over place. However, all points on this continuum prioritized the desire for building community and personal connections to combat a world that many saw as plagued with anomie.

For the CouchSurfing community, the possibility of connecting with real people all over the world was an essential first ingredient in building global solidarity. When I asked Matt what his initial reaction to CS was, he responded, "I think my first thought was a free place to stay. Cool. Then I realized this expanded my network from a few places. The whole world was at my fingertips. Literally it was in every city. That's baffling." Many CouchSurfers were looking to expand their community and build relationships globally. Kim stated, "I think it goes along with it takes a village to raise a child. It is building community just a world wide community in that sense because it's not just a Reno community. It's a community that extends to San Diego and all these different places. You have friends in all these places and you have experience with them that mean something and you've had a good interaction with them. So I think it helps to build a worldwide community in that sense."

Many saw travel and modern life more generally as fragmented, atomized, and isolated. As Jordan from Berkeley explained, the idea of caring for our fellow human beings seems to have been lost in modernity:

Being from a southern culture, you kinda want to take care of them [guests]. I'm really used to that idea. I think this is how it used to be. If someone needed something they could just stop by and you would help them. But society has changed and is very different and broken up and fragmented now. However, I think this is natural to help people. It is more recent that we have become secluded. Its not a big deal to share it now and then.

Along with many other CSers, Jordan saw her participation not in simply instrumental terms but as a way to return to a time and ideal when people cared about one another and were willing to help one another. This willingness to care

for and build community with others through CS is a manifestation of the connection that participants perceived as an antidote to fragmentation.

James believed that as a society we have become obsessed with appearance and

difference. For him, CS is a reminder to move beyond the surface level attributes to

reclaim connection, similarity, and unity.

Oh, it [CS] totally renews, or gives credence or validation or whatever you want to say for your faith in human kind. I love people, much more than animals for example. So this is what I like to believe about humans and this [CS] totally validates my belief in the goodness of others. I think people are all connected and have these common experiences that exist under these different veneers of class, and background, and of musical tastes and movies...the bullshit, what you like to wear what I like to wear, you know what I'm saying. You get under that, we are very similar and everyone I've been able to surf with...there has always been a connection of various depth but always something, some connection is formed.

James felt that fragmentation occurred based on people's superficial differences, but that for CS participants, when given the chance to be involved in the world of hosting/surfing, the differences melt away and the commonalities of our shared humanity take precedence. The experience of connecting with other CS members demonstrated to James the importance of continually building community and not getting trapped in subtle differences between people, but rather choosing to perforate the artificial, and in his view, unimportant, barriers that prevent solidarity among people.

An important sub-theme related to the idea of moving from a fragmented society to one based on social solidarity was the desire to personalize an anonymous world. The importance of connecting on a personal level with the

people and places traveled was essential to CouchSurfers. While staying with my first hosts, Jackson and Jordan, they invited their CS friends, Zack and Sylva, to drop by. This couple, who had CouchSurfed all over the world, related an interesting story: Their first time in Brussels, Sylva said “the only redeeming part of that trip was the host. She gave us the key and left for two days. Talk about trust! When she came back she showed us the city. When the host was gone the city felt impersonal and we felt perpetually lost; but when Anna (the host) came back we quickly found a connection to the space.” Interestingly, as they reminisced about the many places they had CouchSurfed they consistently focused much more on the people they had met and less on the geographical locations they had visited. Sylva mentioned that when she thought of Brussels or Buenos Aires it was her hosts she remembered most, what they did, and the conversations they had. Again and again in these interviews, place receded into the background and people were brought forward.

There was a schema nearly every CouchSurfer used to describe how CS was not about the place, but about the people and the connections formed. Katerina, a Russian living in Madrid, explained how the buildings and structures seemed less important than the human relationship:

When I travel, I just think about meeting different people and not about exactly taking pictures of the building. Because any moment of my life I could come back to the city. The Royal Palace would be there. The Cathedral would be there. Plaza del Mayor would be there. For fifty years I would come back, and it would be exactly the same. The city would be the same but not the people that I met here now. Well, I’m moving in three weeks so the day I’ll come back to Madrid, it won’t be the same. The city will be the same but not my feeling here because my friends and those I have met won’t be here. All the people I met won’t be

here. CS it's for your own personal experience of the city and the people.

Andrea, who lived in Lucerne, Switzerland, wanted me to understand how important it was to not feel like a number but like a human being: "It's not the aspect of accommodation for free but more the aspect of getting into normal life in other countries. You learn more than if you stay in a hotel because there's just other backpackers. I really like this idea, to get to know some people. I guess if you're traveling on your own it's nicer to stay at somebody's place. When I asked her why it was nicer Andrea responded, "It's more personalized. As a person there in a hotel, you're just a number. As a CouchSurfer you leave your mark there". This suggests it is important not only to know others, but also to *be known*.

Even in the socially sophisticated and bustling city of New York, Jill discussed how she often feels isolated and how having a personal connection with someone through CouchSurfing even for a day or two is precious.

Anyone on CS is probably on the internet pretty frequently and on several different online communities and it's just how a lot of us live our lives. It's not for everyone but a lot of us are comfortable getting to know people in that capacity. And it's weird because you think why do you need to get to know people online when you live in a huge city like New York. But it's such a huge city it can be isolating and if you have really specific interests or hobbies and you put that on your profile what you're interested in. Like I'm into punk music and going to shows and next week I have a guy coming from Australia and we're gonna go see a show together. He knew he wanted to come to New York but because we have the same interests it works out really well because he doesn't have to go alone and I don't have to go alone.

The following exchange with Carlos provides a sense of what is important for many CouchSurfers. It has everything to do with the connections, feeling

more human and part of a group of friends. The couch, location and nearly everything else recedes as connection, community, and humanity are highlighted. As Carlos explains, CouchSurfing is:

... another way to make tourism. It's like you have a connection with people from that place. It of course it's very different from, like a, it's different from going to a hostel and it's more rich. It's another thing. Yeah, that. The connection with the people. To share your, I don't know, to open your heart.

JS: So how is CouchSurfing different from traveling in another way?

C: It's more human. It's more human, more human. You have contact with people. You live their real world. It's better. I feel comfortable and, uh, part of the group in the city uh that you're visiting. It's not just the couch. It's the people."

JS: What do you mean?

C: I mean, doesn't matter if the couch is comfortable, or it's not. I mean, the meaning of the CouchSurfing, for me, it's to meet the people ...

For nearly every CouchSurfer, the overriding priority underlying their activities was social connection and building a society based on community and caring for one another. CSers tend to see society as fragmented and people as being isolated from one another, but their participation in CS begins piecing back a space of connection and caring that modernity, in their view, has destroyed. Feeling connected through the CS transnational network and building a global community were dominant themes in most CouchSurfers' stories; and most contrasted these goals with the atomized society in which they found themselves embedded in "ordinary" life. Importantly CouchSurfers were, for the most part, not looking to change all of society but only to find meaning and resistance within a system that feels fragmented to them. By staking out a space based on social feelings and caring, CouchSurfers feel they are escaping the anonymizing, depersonalizing, and fragmented effects that many claim are the inescapable

consequence of modernity.

Rescuing Human Meaning and Enchantment:

This paper moves beyond a theoretical discussion of meaning making in modernity by providing a case study of a transnational community that has attempted to resist aspects of globalization and capitalism through alternative travel and connection. While for the most part, CouchSurfers do not perceive their actions as trying to topple the current economic and social order, however quietly, they have sought to establish a space for authenticity, exchange, solidarity, and personalization in a modern world they feel overlooks these enchanted qualities. Meaning for CouchSurfers is not simply derived from banner waving, shouting, and demanding a restructuring of society, but through personal decisions about how to go about living one's life. In the case of CouchSurfing freedom and meaning making is carried on within the iron cage as opposed to trying to topple the long dominant metaphor of modernization.

Though Ritzer thinks that McDonaldization is hard to resist—and hence retains the 'iron cage' metaphor in many of his recent writings and interviews—he simultaneously states in an interview that “these systems [composed of a multitude of parallel processes of rationalization and McDonaldization] have proved to be quite vulnerable to individuals or relatively small collection of individuals” (Jensen 2002: 31-32). At an optimistic moment, Ritzer claims that “by acting creatively, we can beat it [the confrontation game with these systems] and cause the disintegration of these oppressive systems” (Jensen 2002: 32). Situating more closely in the critical theoretical paradigm (see Best and Kellner

1991), Douglas Kellner argues that social movements against capitalist globalization are important in effecting positive social changes (Kellner 2002). Aside from large-scale structural changes, he also sees these skills as pivotal to participating in democratic politics, as they enable the formation of cyber communities, circulate multimedia information, discuss and debate issues, and engage in effective oppositional politics (“technopolitics” and “cyberactivism”) in a world of accelerated technological changes.

These suggestions by Ritzer, and Kellner express one overriding theme: freedom from domination. In order to rescue human meaning, both these authors and the narratives of CouchSurfers suggest taking action to create the experience we desire as opposed to simply accepting what is presented to us. CouchSurfers have identified a variety of undesirable human meanings created by capitalistic and globalization forces. These meanings include disenchantment, sense of alienation, commodification and severely cheapened versions of invaluable human themes. By empowering the individual within a system fraught with layers of oppression, the hope of theorists and CouchSurfers alike is to create an existence and way of life filled with meaning, *within* the iron cage.

Conclusion

My ethnographic exploration into the world of CouchSurfing was based initially on a simple hunch: There is something interesting and important about this community. At the time I was not sure what that was. However, over the last three years of research I have discovered that CouchSurfing, while an interesting phenomenon in its own right, provides important sociological insights into how the world and people are changing in the twenty-first century as a result of the convergence of technology and globalization. These insights have to do with how a particular group establishes and sustains community based on shared cosmopolitan values; builds trust among strangers; and resists negative aspects of globalization.

The implications of a more global civil society are many but to date have been explored in a largely philosophical manner. From world peace and harmony to growth and destruction of social and economic orders, the speculative consequences of a global civil society have been described as both utopian and apocalyptic. What is apparent is that as a society we are becoming more global; economically, socially, and culturally. There are both possibilities and problems with this phenomenon. CouchSurfing appears to present a concrete means of overcoming some of globalization's problems (impersonal interactions, lack of trust, standardization, excessively nationalistic identity, meaninglessness, etc.) while pursuing its positive aspects (building global relations, developing a caring global ethos, finding meaning, etc.). From my research I have been able to document and glean insights into the slow, yet

inevitable, process of global transformation spurred by technological advancements. Each of the preceding chapters has attempted to detail aspects of this large transformation by using CouchSurfers' stories and experience to understand how people develop (1) cosmopolitanism attitudes, (2) trust of unfamiliar worlds, people and interactions, and (3) resistance to globalization's deficits by creating authentic experiences.

Cosmopolitan attitudes and global orientation.

CouchSurfers differ significantly from other world citizens in that they are more cosmopolitan and have a more global orientation. Chapter Two explored CouchSurfers' overwhelmingly internationalist perspective and documented that they are over 200 times more likely than the average person to 'identify with the world as a whole.' By exploring and becoming part of this transnational community, I encountered a group,, albeit a small one, that has embraced a philosophy of openness, acceptance, and trust and has used the latest technological tools to live these beliefs and values.

Believing humanity is deeply and intricately connected has long been a philosophical view. Loving all beings, whether we know them or not, is a position long espoused by both poets to philosophers. However, CouchSurfing takes this philosophy a step further and proves that some people are willing to take the risk of trusting strangers and actually take a leap of faith to connect with strangers all over the world. This experiential piece of what historically has been a largely speculative philosophical position points to important possibilities for expanding and connecting strangers around the world.

The CouchSurfing community represents a growing voice expressing the need and desire to connect with people in a new --yet old -- way. The idea of taking strangers into your home can be traced back to the Bible²³ but many would argue that this ethos has all but disappeared in contemporary society. CouchSurfing points out that there are still ways to connect with and welcome strangers in a fast paced, individualistic world. My research with the CouchSurfing community led me to conclude that members were not simply expressing a philosophical belief in the importance of connecting with strangers, but were also creating and re-creating this philosophy based upon user experience. Importantly, CS is an experiential community. Members' philosophy of cosmopolitanism is not simply one they were "born with;" rather, it grew out of personal experiences that participants trusted as authentic.

Another important aspect of the macro philosophy of cosmopolitanism is the micro-process of individual relationships. The heart of CouchSurfing is its members. Without the Hosts and Surfers, the entire transnational network, mission, and ethos of CouchSurfing would dissolve. The website's highly idealistic goal of creating world peace and understanding is supposed to occur 'one couch at a time,' i.e., through the formation of one relationship after another. This is a striking example of the concept of 'glocalism'—the intersection of how the global creates the local and visa-versa. The micro and the macro seem to blend until two seemingly opposite concepts – personal relationship and world

²³ Hebrews 13:2 "Take care to keep open house: because in this way some have had angels as their guests, without being conscious of it."

harmony - become one. Every individual who uses CouchSurfing has internalized, created and re-created the macro values and ethos in their own unique way through the particular relationships they have formed through the network and through their hosting and surfing activities.

Issues of risk and trust.

The CouchSurfing community has developed, survived, and flourished because of the way it has navigated issues of risk and trust. Chapter Three delved into how these issues are managed in the day-to-day operations of CouchSurfing. My study concluded that deep trust can be rapidly established among CouchSurfers, despite its being an environment mediated by distance and the internet. However, trust was only able to form if the following conditions were met: a) belief in the essential goodness of human nature b) willingness to assume some risk c) sense of shared community and d) ability to establish familiarity from an initial position of strangeness through 1) self-disclosure 2) mechanisms such as friendship lists, vouching, verification, references and 3) agreed-upon rules. Each of these individual components is interwoven to create deeper bonds between CouchSurfers, which ultimately produce a sense of trust.

In an information age where much of our interaction is mediated by the internet, the importance of identifying and understanding innovative mechanisms for establishing trust is essential. In fact, a June 2011 report from the Pew Foundation on social networking focused specifically on trust development (Hampton, Goulet et al. 2011). The three highlights from this report were as follows:

1. A Facebook user who uses the site multiple times per day is 43% more likely than other Internet users and more than three times as likely as non-Internet users to feel that most people can be trusted.
2. Trust has economic implications according to neuroeconomist Paul J. Zak and a co-researchers who found that nations with higher levels of trust (Sweden, Germany, the U.S.) have stronger economies than those on the other end of the spectrum (the Congo, Sudan, Colombia). "Where there is more trustworthiness, there is more prosperity," Zak says.
3. What are the mechanisms that allow for this trust? The Pew researchers provide an example from the world of CouchSurfing in the person of Sarah Leonard, who wrote: "It may seem odd to put your life in the hands of a total stranger in a foreign country. My mother certainly thinks so, but long use of Facebook, AIM, MySpace, and LinkedIn has shaped my confidence in Internet interactions. I, like many others, act as if some truth does filter down through the interwebs. I would never hitchhike, but I'll sleep in a stranger's living room. Why? Familiarity has been globalized, and trust crystallizes over enormous distances. On Facebook I see abbreviated versions of my friends, but here I used abbreviated portraits of strangers to judge if they might become friends. The transition isn't so hard.

The kind of trust developed and reinforced through the CouchSurfing phenomenon also has larger social and economic implications. Throughout my experience with CS I witnessed the bridging of unfamiliar worlds, and the establishment of bonds and shared experiences that enabled connections among strangers. CouchSurfing provides a laboratory for studying the micro-processes of successful trust-building that occur everyday as part of the CouchSurfing experience. The thick description of this experiential process adds in-depth understanding to the literature on how online trust is established and how it evolves into offline trust.

Resistance to negative aspects of globalization

Finally, the issue of how CouchSurfing and its culture represent a grassroots, and almost implicit, resistance to globalization's negative aspects is

an important aspect of the community. Chapter Four moved beyond theoretical discussions of meaning making in modernity by providing a case study of a transnational community that has attempted to resist aspects of globalization and capitalism through alternative travel and personal connection. While for the most part, CouchSurfers do not perceive their actions as trying to topple the current economic and social order, however quietly, they have sought to establish a space for authenticity, exchange, solidarity, and personalization in a modern world that they feel overlooks these 'enchanted' qualities. Meaning for CouchSurfers is not derived from banner waving, shouting, and demanding a restructuring of society, but rather through personal decisions about how to go about living one's life. By empowering the individual within a system fraught with layers of oppression, the hope of CouchSurfers is to create an existence and way of life filled with meaning, *within* the iron cage.

The research reported in Chapter Four suggests that Couchsurfing is a process of "existential authenticity" as defined by Wang (1999: ; Wang 2000). Authenticity and having an authentic experience drive participants to 'rebel' against inauthentic and commoditized travel by the simple act of sleeping on a stranger's couch. In this way, members are able to break out of modernity's shackles and escape the structure of inauthentic travel. By focusing on what appears to be merely an act of sleeping on a stranger's couch, this study offers an important example of the social meaning in the tourism literature as well as the existential literature on the consequences of globalization and modernity. This alternative form of travel combined with

the perceived legitimacy of members' experiences tells a story of the quest for authentic self and human relationships that moves beyond the desire to personalize experiences of travel for the individual.

Summation:

In the final analysis what is most important is whether or not CouchSurfing is succeeding as an online site that brings people together in meaningful interaction that promotes trust and reinforces cosmopolitan values and orientation. There has been considerable academic debate regarding the role of the internet, and globalization more generally, in shaping the future of social relations. Some sociologists argue that sites such as Facebook might not promote strong ties between people, but they do greatly enable weak ones—and these connections lead to jobs, apartments, and partners (Granovetter 1973). A recent report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project states that "Research is showing that the internet is not destroying relationships [but rather] enabling people to maintain existing ties, often to strengthen them, and at times to forge new ties" (Boase, Pew et al.).

Others are less sanguine, however. Lynn Smith-Lovin (2007), argues online social networks are, "not connecting us in a deeper or more complete way than before. But neither are they driving out close personal contact. They are another route for information, and they allow us to develop more specialized communities." In the end Smith-Lovin (2007) argues that face-to-face encounters are the sine qua non of strong ties; a relationship can begin online but without in-person interaction it is unlikely to be sustained in any important way.

CouchSurfing might be conceived as a unique way to maximize the strengths of electronic social networks by combining initial internet contact with eventual face-to-face exchange. As a recent article from GOOD magazine summarized, "CouchSurfing, for all its problems, might well be an example of an online social network that actually works. It brings about real conversation. It harnesses the tools of social networking software to create meaningful in-person encounters. And it has begun, however quietly, to pull down the curtains that separate us from one another. The evidence is there on the site itself, in the testimonies of friendship between people who were once strangers but who met, say, over a weekend in Prague and whose lives were changed utterly as a result" (Alsop 2006). As such, it may provide insights into best practices for utilizing social networks to successfully promote a more trusting, cooperative, and functional global society.

Post Script:

Since the majority of this dissertation was written a massive change has swept through the CouchSurfing community. CouchSurfing International Inc. used to be a non-profit corporation incorporated in the U.S. state of New Hampshire. In November 2007, they applied for the federal 501(c)(3) non-profit status, but that was not granted, which according to Casey Fenton (the founder of CS International), led him to seek "other options."²⁴ In August 2011, CouchSurfing announced that its certification as a for-profit B corporation was

²⁴ "CouchSurfing brainstorm group thread". Couch Surfing. <http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=7621&post=8603025>. Retrieved April 2011.

approved. At the same time Benchmark Capital made a \$7.6 million investment in the new for-profit site.²⁵ The site had previously depended on revenue from the voluntary identity verification service fee and contributions.

The announcement that CouchSurfing had become a for-profit corporation created a backlash from core members and volunteers associated with the organization. A protest group within CouchSurfing of more than 1,400 members was formed in response, adopting the name "We are against CS becoming a corporation".²⁶ The protesters see CouchSurfing's source code and user database as community created and say that they should not be used for profits.

On the petitiononchange.org website²⁷, CS members voiced their concern:

Members did more than use the website as a free service; they invested earnest effort to create a common new set of accepted values: global hospitality, respect for cultural differences, tolerance of social choices, trust in community, open sharing of time and self in the pursuit of informal diplomacy and friendship. They promoted these ideals and were encouraged to do so by the management, who said that CouchSurfing would always remain a non-profit organization.

We believe these changes betray the relationship the organization had with its network of volunteers and members, the relationship that shaped CouchSurfing into what it is today, and are concerned that its values will not persist.

The response from the CouchSurfing leadership has been mixed. Casey

²⁵ Tweney, Dylan (24 August 2011). "Benchmark plops down \$7.6M to make CouchSurfing into a for-profit". VentureBeat. <<http://venturebeat.com/2011/08/24/benchmark-couchsurfing/>> Retrieved September 2011.

²⁶ "After going for-profit, CouchSurfing faces user revolt". Gigaom. <<http://gigaom.com/2011/09/01/after-going-for-profit-couchsurfing-faces-user-revolt/>> Retrieved September 2011.

²⁷ <https://www.change.org/petitions/petition-against-the-new-legal-status-of-couchsurfing>. Accessed 1/24/12.

Fenton and the public relations team of the new CouchSurfing International has stated nothing will change other than a better and more reliable website and backend system.²⁸ However, in an interview with the Newspaper El País the new CEO of CouchSurfing Dan Hoffer, stated that there is currently a plan underway to allow the company to grow much bigger with the final objective to go public.²⁹

At this point, the CouchSurfing transition from a non-profit to a for-profit carries with it more questions than answers. What does this mean for members? Will members now be required to pay fees to join the website? How will this change the CouchSurfing community? Can the CS community still expect full transparency from CouchSurfing International in terms of management structure, ownership, and finances as a for-profit Corporation? What about the ethos, mission, and values CouchSurfing espouses, will these be lost (as well as membership) with a new business model aimed to maximize profits? And what about those who have donated hours of time to Couchsurfing.com over the years? Will they have to pay for the upgrade or will they be rewarded with any other benefits?

²⁸ <http://www.couchsurfing.org/bcorp>. Accessed 1/24/12

²⁹ "El jefe de CouchSurfing asegura que su objetivo es salir a Bolsa". El País. <http://www.elpais.com/articulo/Pantallas/jefe/CouchSurfing/asegura/objetivo/salir/Bolsa/elpepirtv/20110913elpepirtv_2/Tes> Retrieved September 2011.

Appendix

Name	Location	Age	Occupation	Interview Dates
Alex and Lilia	Zurich, Switzerland	31 and 28	PhD Student (civil engineering); Graphic designer	8/12/09-8/13/09
Andrea	Luzerne, Switzerland	24	Real estate management for the Swiss government	8/14/09-8/16/09
Anita and Sebastian	Burstadt, Germany and San Diego (hosted)	23 and 26	Student (sociology and psychology); and Handyman/Student	1/21/09-1/22/09 5/13/09-5/16/09
Buddy and Emily	Memphis, Tennessee	28 and 25	Accountant and Administrative Assistance	6/22/09-6/24/09
Candice and Shivani	Salt Lake City, Utah	25; 29	Artists	8/1/2009
Carlos, Chloe, and Edwin, Elian, and Alle	Barcelona, Spain	21; 20; 25; 26; 24	Students and workers	1/28/09-1/30/09
Caitlin and Kieran	San Diego (hosted)	19; 28	Student; Computer Programmer	5/17/09-5/20/09
Christoph	Paris, France	36	Airport traffic controller	1/24/09-1/26/09
David and Marta	Zurich, Switzerland	29 and 30	IT Consultant; SBB (railway) customer information	9/9/09-9/11/09
Dwayne	Laramie, Wyoming	36	Environmental Surveyor for the State	8/2/09-8/3/09

Figure 1: Interview List of CouchSurfers

Name	Location	Age	Occupation	Interview Dates
Gary	Munich, Germany	36	Business Analysts for a Bank	8/16/09-8/18/09
Jackson and Jordan	Berkeley, CA	30 and 24	Server at a brewery; physician assistant	7/28/09-7/30/09
James	Brooklyn, NY	37	Teacher at International School in Brooklyn	8/10/09-8/11/09
Jean	Lincoln, Nebraska	79	Retired Volunteer at Unitarian Universalist Church	8/1/09-8/2/09
Jill	New York, New York	27	Financial analyst	8/9/2009
Katarina, Kevin, Mark and John	Madrid, Spain	21, 22, 24	Student; English Teacher; English Teacher	9/3/09-9/6/09
Katherin	Berlin, Germany	34	Photographer	8/18/09-8/20/09
Klaus	Barcelona, Spain	33	Busking (hand drum)	8/30/09-8/31/09
Marina, Zhana, Claudia	Geneva, Switzerland	23, 22, 22	Student; Student; Student	9/7/09-9/8/09
Matt and Stephanie	Chicago, Illinois	27 and 21	Gymnastics Instructor and Student	8/4/09-8/5/09
Megan and Eric	Akron, Ohio	30 Something's	Voice Instructor and Artists	8/6/09-8/7/09
Michelle	San Diego (hosted)	51	Renaissance Worker	4/8/2009
Paula and Irune	San Sebastian, Spain	24 and 23	Medical Student; Student	8/31/09-9/2/09
Peter	Salt Lake City, Utah	25	Yogi and Odd Jobs	7/31/09-8/2/09
Prune	Marseille, France	23	Unemployed	8/26/09-8/28/09
Rob and Anna	Lincoln, Nebraska	45 and 43	Retired Intellectuals	8/2/2009

Figure 1: Interview List of CouchSurfers Cond.

Name	Location	Age	Occupation	Interview Dates
Prune	Marseille, France	23	Unemployed	8/26/09-8/28/09
Rob and Anna	Lincoln, Nebraska	45 and 43	Retired Intellectuals	8/2/2009
Rolf	Munich, Germany	33	Professional Traveler	8/17/09-8/18/09
Svetlana	Berlin, Germany	22	Student	8/20/09-8/21/09
Tanya, Phibi, Johnny, and Kim	Reno, Nevada	19; 20; 21; 20	Students	7/30/09-7/31/09
Tomas	San Diego (hosted)	29	Doctor	3/23/2009
Vincent	Paris, France	29	Financial analyst	8/22/09-8/24/09

Figure 1: Interview List of CouchSurfers Cond.

General Statistics		
CouchSurfers		2,089,695
Successful Surfings (approx)		2,281,967
Friendships Created (approx)		2,410,686
Positive Experiences (approx)		3,839,102
Unique Countries/Territories Represented		238
Unique States/Provinces Represented		3,014
Unique Cities Represented		76,456
Unique Languages Represented		334

Top 10 Couch Surfing Countries and Territories (surfers)		
United States	455,892	21.8%
Germany	198,400	9.5%
France	181,552	8.7%
United Kingdom	99,277	4.8%
Canada	97,682	4.7%
Italy	61,174	2.9%
Australia	58,291	2.8%
Spain	57,847	2.8%
Brazil	56,144	2.7%
Netherlands	41,895	2.0%
Show All...		

Couch Surfers by World Region (surfers)		
Europe	1,067,140	51.1%
North America	577,016	27.6%
South America	126,129	6.0%
Central Asia	116,566	5.6%
Oceania	74,646	3.6%
Southeast Asia	42,569	2.0%
Africa	36,779	1.8%
Middle East	30,664	1.5%
Central America and the Caribbean	10,147	0.5%
Antarctic Region	78	0.0%

Most Spoken Languages (surfers)		
English	1,558,081	74.6%
French	419,762	20.1%
Spanish	366,581	17.5%
German	342,880	16.4%

Top Couch Surfing Cities (surfers)		
France, Ile-de-France, Paris	37,447	1.8%
United Kingdom, England, London	31,520	1.5%
Germany, Berlin, Berlin	27,933	1.3%
Canada, Quebec, Montreal	21,102	1.0%
Turkey, Istanbul Province, Istanbul	19,352	0.9%
Austria, Vienna, Vienna	15,895	0.8%
Australia, Victoria, Melbourne	14,745	0.7%
United States, New York, New York	14,063	0.7%
Spain, Catalonia, Barcelona	13,355	0.6%
Argentina, Buenos Aires City, Buenos Aires	13,166	0.6%
Show All...		

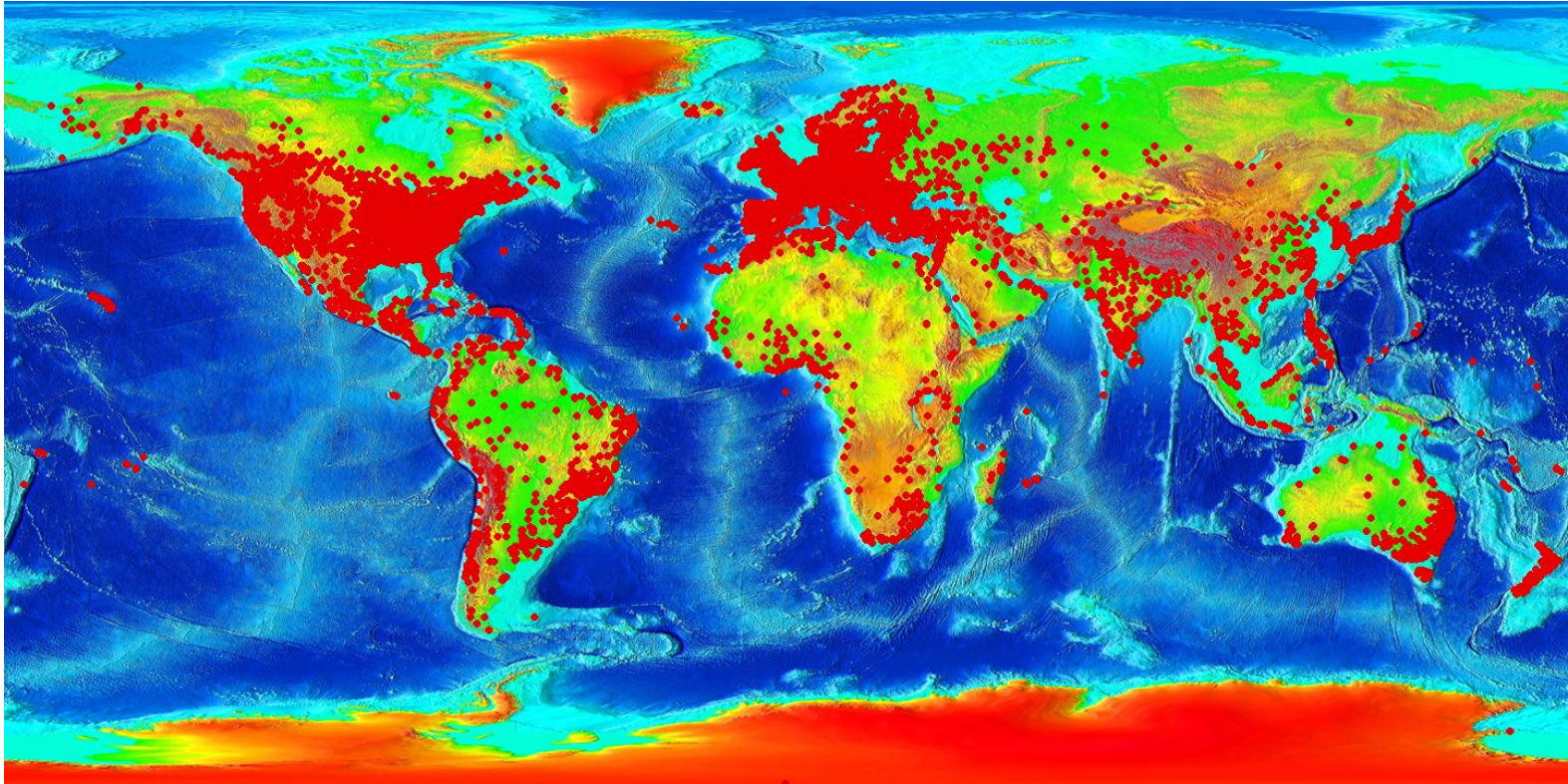
Couches for Surfing (surfers)		
Yes	582,382	27.9%
Coffee or a drink	434,815	20.8%
Traveling at the moment	418,500	20.0%
Maybe	326,463	15.6%
No	254,035	12.2%
Definitely!	73,502	3.5%

Couch Surfer Genders (surfers)		
Male	1,047,973	50.1%
Female	878,626	42.0%
Several people	147,923	7.1%
Unknown	1	0.0%

Figure 2: Recent Statistics on CouchSurfers
(Statistics Generated: August 8th, 2010 - 5:42 am)

Italian	108,744	5.2%
Portuguese	107,584	5.1%
Chinese (Mandarin)	74,495	3.6%
Russian	69,701	3.3%
Dutch	66,244	3.2%
Polish	52,593	2.5%
Least Spoken Languages (surfers)		
Yapese	1	0.0%
Komi	1	0.0%
Pohnpeian	2	0.0%
Ganda	2	0.0%
Sign Language – Catalan	2	0.0%
Mari	2	0.0%
Ingush	2	0.0%
Ossetian	2	0.0%
Kosraean	2	0.0%
Sign Language - Trinidad and Tob2	2	0.0%
Couch Surfer Ages (surfers)		
Average Age	28	
Ages 18 to 24	842,517	40.3%
Ages 25 to 29	651,996	31.2%
Ages 30 to 34	286,920	13.7%
Ages 35 to 39	126,064	6.0%
Ages 40 to 49	106,937	5.1%
Ages 50 to 59	45,544	2.2%
Ages 60 to 69	14,681	0.7%
Ages 70 to 79	1,912	0.1%
Ages 80 to 89	370	0.0%
Other Info: (surfers)		
Surfers with Photos	1,222,359	58.5%
Vouched Users	140,760	6.7%
Verified Users	149,499	7.2%
Ambassadors	1,572	0.1%
Groups	27,847	
Group Members	1,984,543	

Figure 2: Recent Statistics on CouchSurfers Cond.



**Figure 3: Graphical Representation of where CouchSurfers reside (red dots)
(Map Generated: August 8th, 2010 - 5:42 am)**



Figure 4: CouchSurfing activity across the globe
(From "Reputation and Reciprocity on CouchSurfing.com" by Lauterbach, Truong, Shah, and Adamic)

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