COUCHSURFING IN NORTH TEXAS:

A LOCALIZED VIEW OF A

GLOBAL PHENOMENON

by

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to conduct an exploratory research project to discover issues and problems faced by people who are a part of Hospitality Exchange Networks. This research focuses on the largest free travel based network, CouchSurfing.org, which currently has over 5 million members.

Mixed methods were used to gather the data. The main source of data was taken qualitatively when the researcher conducted nineteen in-depth interviews with couchsurfers who had varying degrees of experience in this community. Ethnographic techniques were also used during field work, which included "surfing" five times and going to numerous local couchsurfing events in the North Texas area. There was extensive use of content analysis by examining the design, structure, and content of the CouchSurfing.org website. In addition, quantitative data was obtained through the use of a survey given to each respondent.

The central theme this study focuses on is the problem of "participation". I learned that while most couchsurfers hold similar beliefs and lifestyles, there is a large amount of variation in how people choose to participate in this community. Couchsurfing relies on its members to be

able to host and surf in order to balance out needs and demands of the network, yet I discovered it is more common for someone to choose one of these roles over the other. Personal choice of participation was found to be not only about individual motivations and wants, but also issues such as trust, comfort, privacy, danger and safety. All of these issues act as barriers which can limit a person's choices in participating in couchsurfing. Each of these barriers is grounded in larger sociological forces that impact not only couchsurfers in various ways, but non-couchsurfing outsiders as well.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is intended to be an exploratory study of a community of people who engage in an activity called "couchsurfing." This group of individuals (aptly named couchsurfers) open up their houses to one another and allow other couchsurfers to live with them cost-free for a few days while they are visiting a city or country outside their own, be it for work or leisure. This differs significantly from the normal accommodations that tourists utilize while traveling, such as getting a hotel room when traveling around the U.S. and abroad. Couchsurfing is a fairly unique community that exists both online and offline. Through the use of a hospitality-exchange network (like www.CouchSurfing.org), users are able to locate and select interesting and like-minded couchsurfers to visit at home and interact with offline. CouchSurfing is a way to engage in tourism, but differs in many respects from traditional forms of tourism and may have more in common with the notion of postmodern tourism (new tourism — Featherstone 1991; Urry 2002), which emphasizes globalization and tourists' motivations for authenticity and experiencing the real "local" cultures they visit. Bialski (2008) argues that couchsurfing websites are helping to form a new category of tourism (intimate tourism) only recently beginning to develop.

Although similar studies have been conducted on other alternative forms of tourism and traveling (such as backpacking and staying in hostels) couchsurfing is still a relatively new phenomenon. While there have been times throughout history where welcoming strangers into your home and providing accommodations for a night was considered a customary part of society, this differs greatly from what couchsurfers are doing today since their accommodations are based less on necessity and more on the experiences gained through staying with a local while traveling.

Only a small amount of research has been published on couchsurfing so far. Very little information exists about the issues and problems many couchsurfers face. No one has yet attempted to fully describe the structure of couchsurfing (roles, rules, and social interactions) as well as the individuals who help create this community (their attitudes, motivations, behaviors, and beliefs). Many of the couchsurfing studies I have discovered lack a sociological perspective or fail to recognize the social and cultural forces that permeate this phenomenon. I believe the previous literature has major gaps that make it difficult to establish a complete and well-rounded picture of what couchsurfing actually entails, and the common themes and perceptions shared among its members. This study will begin that difficult task by setting out to clearly define the roles embedded within couchsurfing and describe in detail the socially situated experiences of its participants in order to improve our basic understanding of the couchsurfing population.

Couchsurfing is a global community with members from all over the world, challenging for researchers to determine if shared characteristics, beliefs, trends, and issues exist within the overall couchsurfer community. I believe that this is due to the vast amount of cultural diversity found within this population. With members spread throughout hundreds of different cities and countries in the world, many of the 'differences' that previous researchers have seen in their studies may be based more on cultural expectations, norms, and beliefs rather than the uniqueness of individuals within the community. Therefore, I "localized" this study by limiting its scope to one specific geographical region of North Texas, rather than attempting to generalize to couchsurfing's large and globalized community that would include the millions of users accessing the CouchSurfing.org website. By focusing on a narrower population, the study can be more detailed and able to examine specific cultural, social, and political influences that may be shared by the individuals within this local couchsurfing community.

In this thesis, I discuss several key issues that couchsurfers are likely to encounter during their 'couchsurfing experiences' (such as safety, trust, privacy, identity and self-disclosure). Given that this study is primarily qualitative, the participants themselves contributed

to the direction of the research as themes emerged throughout the data collection process (Marvasti 2004). Nonetheless, I will describe how the previous literature on couchsurfing led me to use symbolic interactionism as an organizing perspective to construct a methodology that addresses both the couchsurfing community and its culture, as well as the individuals who shape this culture through their interactions and experiences with one another. I implemented various qualitative techniques (in-depth interviews, participant observation/ethnography, and content analysis) in order to study this population at the individual, interactional, and community levels.

1.1 What is Couchsurfing?

There are currently millions of people who participate in a global phenomenon known as couchsurfing, where individuals ". . . travel to foreign places while residing in the private home or on the 'couch' of other members of the [couchsurfing community]" for free over a short time period of a few days (Bialski 2008:3). Couchsurfing is most common between strangers, or friends of friends, who have never met in person until their actual couchsurfing encounter. This does not necessarily mean that they have never communicated before. Most couch surfers meet through websites which help with the exchange of basic information about each other and their travel plans. This early interaction is typically very limited however, and accomplished primarily through an electronic medium (such as e-mail). Prior to the actual "couchsurfing" experience, they are not yet friends with their hosts, but not completely strangers either (or are they?).

In the couchsurfing community there are two basic roles; the "host," a person who is willing to open up his or her home, and the "surfer," who is visiting the hosts city and will be a guest in his or her home. This commonly includes the surfer sleeping on the host's couch, in a guest room, on the floor, or even in a tent pitched outside in the backyard. Surfers gain the life experiences of sharing a person's home and culture with them for a short time. On online

couchsurfing sites, most users label themselves as either being open to hosting by explicitly stating that their "couch is available," or as a surfer by indicating they are open to having "coffee or a drink" (meaning they are willing to meet up and interact with other couchsurfers, but currently unable to host or surf at that time).

Couchsurfing websites are used primarily by surfers to find a suitable host who will get along well with them (by examining their on-line profile for similar interests, activities, etc.), and is willing and able to accommodate them during their expected stay in the area (open for particular dates and times). The aim is to create an environment where the "host" and "surfer" can interact freely with one another, allowing for what CouchSurfing.org (the largest couchsurfing website in the world) calls "inspiring experiences", which are described as "fun, exciting and accessible experiences that stimulate people to learn and grow. Experiences of this nature encourage people to explore and connect with people and places that are different than what we're accustomed to" (CouchSurfing.org 2011a).

Couchsurfing relies on a network of individuals who are able and willing to participate in this activity, a type of community that has been traditionally defined as a "hospitality exchange" network. These networks emphasize hospitality as a form of reciprocal exchange (Molz 2007:66), where both parties are expected to return favors. For example, it is not uncommon for surfers to help out their host by cleaning around the house, or paying for a shared meal at a nice restaurant (Molz 2007:68; Bialski 2008).Tan (2010:371) notes that "[h]ospitality exchange networks are not a new phenomenon — the oldest such network is Servas International, founded in 1949 by an American named Bob Luitweiler. With the tagline 'With every true friendship we build the basis for World Peace', Servas International set a common theme also used by newer hospitality exchange networks, to promote intercultural understandings and to reduce intolerance among people of different cultural backgrounds (Heesakkers 2008)."

With the advent of the Internet in the 1990s and with the rise of social networking sites throughout the 2000s, we have seen hospitality exchange networks transform from small

localized groups to a massive "community" of people who interconnect from across the globe. Today, hospitality exchange networks primarily consist of a handful of free public websites, such as CouchSurfing.org, HospitalityClub.org, and GlobalFreeloaders.com. As of January 2013, CouchSurfing.org is by far the largest and most influential, with over 5.5 million registered users from approximately 97,000 cities across 207 different countries and territories (CouchSurfing.org 2013), followed by HospitalityClub.org — with only 647 thousand users (HospitalityClub.org 2013).

Since CouchSurfing.org is by far the largest and most widely used hospitality exchange network currently, I have decided to focus my study on just those individuals who are users of this website. To better understand how CouchSurfing.org fits into the overall form and functions of couchsurfing, I will examine its history and development into the website it is today, its present layout, and the tools it places into hands of the millions of couchsurfers worldwide.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since hospitality exchange networks like CouchSurfing.org have only emerged within the last decade and can still be considered a fairly new and developing social phenomenon, few existing research studies have investigated this type of community. Recently, researchers like Jun-E Tan (2010:368) have suggested ". . . that the advent of Web 2.0 and increased interaction among users through social network sites and other avenues justify more scholastic attention on interpersonal relationships online." Technological changes have had untold effects on the development and maintenance of both online and offline communities. "The internet has changed the concept of community, blurring the distinction between virtual communities and face-to-face communities. Research exists on both online and offline communities; however, research on communities that are present in both geographical and virtual environments are sparse" (Rosen et al. 2011:2). The majority of recently published literature on couchsurfing has focused on the online portion of the experience, with the intent of addressing the many issues and problems faced within the current social networking world; such as privacy and self-disclosure (Peterson and Siek 2009), community and belonging (Rosen et al. 2011; Molz 2007), social capital (Zhu 2010), or trust and reciprocity within online reputation systems (Teng et al. 2010; Lauterbach et al. 2009)

Most of the research conducted concerning the online aspects of couchsurfing has been headed by researchers in the fields of communications and information technologies whose primary focus appears to be on examining how the user utilizes the technology of the website. From this perspective, CouchSurfing.org is seen as a "tool" that mediates individual-to-individual communication rather than as a dynamic social process influencing how users

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perceive each other and interact within this community. Examining the online aspects of couchsurfing as merely a tool, we are left with an assortment of descriptive studies focused on how the design and structure of CouchSurfing.org is utilized by its members, which does not account for why these processes and mechanisms (e.g., trust rating system) are necessary for individuals to engage in couchsurfing in the first place. These descriptive studies largely fail to take into account the sociological forces that may be underlining the structure (and design choices) of technology facilitating this online community, and how CouchSurfing.org addresses the social issues and problems faced in both the online and offline experiences of couchsurfers.

While couchsurfing websites do share many structural features in common with traditional social networking sites, such as users having a profile page and the ability to add "friends," the similarities end there. Social networking sites have traditionally been focused on maintaining existing relationships and personal social interactions tied to face-to-face encounters throughout a person's life (Dotan and Zaphiris 2010; Olsen 2006`). It is the norm to only accept a "friend-request" from someone you have already met in person, or who has at least an important connection to one of your social circles (e.g., workplace, extended family, or friends-of-friends). This differs for hospitality exchange networks like CouchSurfing.org, where ". . . the main purpose is to connect strangers rather than preexisting contacts, and the connections established transverse virtual space and enter members' homes" (Rosen et al. 2011:2). I believe that this intent to help facilitate the finding and creation of new friends or acquaintances leaves CouchSurfing.org to have more in common with dating and social gathering websites (such as MeetUp.org) than social networks like Facebook or Google+. Nonetheless, many couchsurfing studies have formulated their research methodology, analysis, and conclusions as if they were studying 'just another social networking site', resulting in misleading or, at least, incomplete findings.

While most of the current research on couchsurfing has emphasized the importance of the structure and design of hospitality exchange websites for the user population, some of these

studies have focused completely on this aspect. This undercuts the importance that individuals have on couchsurfing by failing to take into consideration what users bring to the site (e.g., their actions, intentions, and understandings). We can see this issue in Katherine Peterson and Katie A. Siek's (2009) research on self-disclosure within CouchSurfing.org. The authors describe the overall function of the online-site and its implications for the behaviors and beliefs of participants by explaining that "Couchsurfing[.org] users must develop some kind of rapport and trust before allowing an online friend to stay at their home. . . [which relies on] users [being] comfortable with information disclosure because users must share some personal information to establish [this kind] of relationship" (Peterson and Siek 2009:257). Peterson and Siek's (2009) findings indicated that the "[p]articipants were mildly concerned about the information disclosed, but mostly thought that a third party would not take the time to target them . . . Most of the participants would disclose information via Couchsurfing[.org] with little information (e.g., a request to stay with them) about the other party" (2009:259). They concluded that "the participants were generally not concerned with the information they disclosed online. . . " (2009:256) and that the couch surfers they interviewed lacked any "understanding or care" about the potential threats which could appear from the information they provided on the website (2009:264).

Peterson and Siek (2009) recognize the importance of self-disclosure within the community, but failed to take into account how this online community influences and molds how individual participants frame the concept of "self-disclosure." A portion of literature and researchers studying social networking sites traditionally defines and views self-disclosure as problematic (Nosko et al. 2010; Fogel and Nehmad 2009; Kay et al. 2004`). In their study, Peterson and Siek follow this trend by discussing how self-disclosure is a problem that needs to be minimized. They argue that there are potential privacy concerns and dangers with disclosing personal information on the Internet since this information could be used against the couchsurfer through "malicious acts that can be committed with their personal data" such as

"the risk of burglary based on travel dates and home location" that they have revealed on their public profiles (2009:257). Nonetheless, the couchsurfers they studied did not view self-disclosure as a problematic issue that could lead to their victimization. This does not necessarily mean that these individuals didn't 'understand or care' about safety. If the researchers had considered the influence that the culture of couchsurfing has on individual understandings of self-disclosure rather than simply assuming it is a problem, they would have seen that the sense of community established online and the intent of participating in "couchsurfing" may create an environment of openness and understanding wherein self-disclosure is perceived as a necessity (or "given") that is expected within all interactions. Couchsurfers are more likely than others to view self-disclosure as an inherent benefit to the community rather than a personal problem. I believe that this example exemplifies a problem seen throughout the existing literature on couchsurfing. Namely, failing to account for the structure and community found within couchsurfing and how individuals come together to create it.

I only found three studies which qualitatively examined participating individuals, and their perspective, attitudes, and beliefs regarding their own couchsurfing experiences: Tan (2010); Peterson and Siek (2009); and Bialski (2008). These studies all collected their data primarily through in-depth interviews. Bialski (2008) and Tan (2010) also added a participant observation element to their respective studies by acting as "host" and opening their own homes to allow participants within their study to stay with them as a "surfer." Designing a couchsurfing study where the researcher participates as the host makes practical sense. This strategy opens up the study to obtaining easier access to couchsurfing's diverse and worldwide population since the participants are the ones who have to overcome the hurdles of traveling to the researcher, and not vice versa. This is a great benefit when studying a widespread population that transcends nearly all territorial boundaries and languages. Since the participants in both the Tan (2010) and Bialski (2008) studies were nearly all from different countries, with various cultural backgrounds, this gave the researchers a broad perspective on the great variation of

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social, political, and cultural experiences seen among individuals within this globalized network of couchsurfers.

Instead of following the precedent these studies set, I chose to focus on couchsurfers drawn from one specific geographical area (North Texas) rather than the larger global couchsurfing population. Examining a less diverse population will allow the study to identify similarities among these couchsurfers against the background of the local social, political, and economic environment that they share. Sampling from this relatively smaller population should be helpful in obtaining a locally representative set of participants and in analyzing my observations since there should be less variation amongst the participants within the sample with respect to confounding regional or national influences. Although limiting this study to include only couchsurfers from the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex will shrink the population size far enough for generalizations to be made about this local couchsurfing community, it will be impossible to determine if my findings or conclusions hold any relevance or similarities to the overall couchsurfing population, or the other regional communities that together create it.

I designed this study to avoid the problems and issues that researchers who engaged in the "hosting" role faced. In his own qualitative study on trust, Jun-E Tan (2010:374) recognizes that since 'surfers' rely so heavily on the host's hospitality and free accommodations, the researcher "may be subjecting them to a situation of power imbalance" (my emphasis added). This can have untold effects on the validity of the data. The researcher's position of power as a host could ultimately lead the participant's own typical couchsurfing behaviors to change in accord with the researcher's wishes. In hosting, researchers may unintentionally create a social environment which hinges too heavily on the researcher's own intent and motivations, and may significantly influence the participants. The researcher-host and surfer interaction is potentially unique, separate and different from that of the traditional couchsurfing experience.

Another issue occurring in these studies was their sampling techniques, which I believe could have resulted in sampling errors where their samples' characteristics are vastly different from the overall population from which they were attempting to draw (Schutt and Bachman 2007). One challenge in studying couchsurfing is an inherent bias resulting from the power surfer's exercise in selecting when, where, and with whom to couchsurf. This occurs because it is the surfer who always reaches out and makes the first contact with a host. Accordingly, participants had to have actively selected a host whom they knew to be a researcher (which was explicitly disclosed on the researcher's public profile), and may not have been the traditional couchsurfers researchers would have wanted or expected. It is impossible to know how many potential participants self-selected themselves in, or out, of these two studies. Those who did 'choose' to participate could have some type of motivations and intent which may, or may not, match that of their fellow couchsurfers. Researchers choosing to host in their own homes also limited their ability to gain access to the population they intended to study since only individuals who wanted to couchsurf in the specific locale where the researcher was collecting data were included. This leaves both Bialski's (2008) and Tan's (2010) studies with a biased sample of people who want to be studied. There is a good chance that some form of selection bias can, and will, occur when utilizing participant observation in this way.

Nearly all of the existing research conducted on couchsurfing relies too heavily on either the online or offline interactions of the community. None has yet attempted to fully bring these two elements together to gain a more complete and vivid picture of the couchsurfing experience. My study attempted to fill this gap by examining participants' interpretations and interactions across all "levels" of one local couchsurfing community, to expand upon and further evaluate the findings and conclusions reported in the existing literature.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In order to best understand and describe the couchsurfing phenomenon, I will explore the sociological forces that are present throughout it, from the institutionalized structure of the CouchSurfing.org website, to the subtle and reinforcing nature of the online and offline interactions and the lived experiences of couchsurfers (both inside and apart from the couchsurfing community). Social factors influence the individual's engagement in and performance of "couchsurfing," the couchsurfing community itself, and all the interactions seen within it. To examine couchsurfing from a comprehensive perspective that integrates the individual, community, and interactional dynamics, this research project employed a qualitative method of data collection utilizing a mixture of techniques involving interviews, participant observation, and a content analysis of the CouchSurfing.org website.

Many methodological issues and problems arise when undertaking a qualitative study of couchsurfing, which is experienced on a large and global scale. Not only does this population include millions of users who are geographically spread out across the world, it presents a great deal of diversity among couchsurfers in cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. Any sociological analysis attempting to qualitatively explore couchsurfing would have to find a way to manage the effects of different social origins and cultures among participants in order to highlight the distinctive features of the couchsurfing phenomenon. Unlike previous research on this topic, I decided to "localize" the study by focusing on couchsurfers in a smaller geographical region (North Texas), rather than worldwide. I will look at hosts and surfers from this region only. This will provide a more practical, accessible, and less complicated social context within which to examine participation in couchsurfing.

One of the hardest aspects of conducting qualitative research is gaining access to the population being studied. Luckily with a few clicks, the CouchSurfing.org website makes it easy to find all the participants within North Texas. But identifying local participants is only the first hurdle; another is getting them to agree to be studied. Since couchsurfing appears to be a community that emphasizes sharing and openness, I believed couchsurfers should be highly receptive to researchers and their questions. They allow complete strangers into their home whom they talk about their city and their lives, so what would stop them from doing that with me? Couchsurfing at its core is about meeting people, sharing, and learning from others through interactions and discussions — which is strikingly similar to the intent of qualitative research that utilizes interviews and participant observation to learn more about social phenomena. Therefore, I expected this population to have little to no qualms about being researched, and assumed that most would likely enjoy discussing themselves and their own experiences with couchsurfing.

3.1 Theoretical Foundation

While researching couchsurfing, I noticed numerous parallels to the work of Erving Goffman (1959) and his perspective, as illustrated throughout The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. In this book, Goffman "analyzes how individuals and groups of people present images of themselves to others. To tackle the analysis of how people manage their impressions, Goffman suggests that we adopt a dramaturgical analogy. Doing so means examining individual and collective social behaviors as if people are actors performing characters onstage for an audience. These actions reflect how we locate ourselves to others and act out identities" (Hewitt and Shulman 2011:66). Goffman's perspective is based on the premise that people, like actors in a play, are guided primarily by the *roles* that they must perform within their daily interactions. These social roles not only help to establish the relations between individuals within an interaction, but specific social scripts are embedded within these

roles that define the common behaviors and actions which allow social interactions to be carried out in fairly predictable ways (Fiske 2004:152). Couchsurfing has yet to be explored with these concepts in mind and I believe that couchsurfing, in turn, can help shed new light on the powerful effects that social roles have on individuals and their daily interactions.

In couchsurfing, the roles of "surfer" and "host" have been explicitly established and are embedded in nearly every aspect of the couchsurfing process. These roles are an important element within the structure of CouchSurfing.org and in interactions between its users. In online forums, webpages, profiles, and even offline interactions (e.g., in organized local events), fellow couchsurfers openly discuss these roles, and the norms connecting with them; for example, leaving tips on "how to be a good host " or "guest " when couchsurfing (wiki.couchsurfing.org 2011). Although the majority of couch surfers will ultimately experience both the 'surfer' and 'host' roles at various times during their involvement within this community (Lauterbach et al. 2009), couchsurfers still appear to frame and define their specific encounters and interactions in relation to the role they were 'performing' at the time (e.g. "last summer when I was *surfing* in Paris" vs. "when I am at home I am always *hosting*").

These two roles of host and surfer, may each signify a specific mindset distinct from the other. Roles are not only a part of the common discourse within the population, but also play a significant part in the interactions between couchsurfers — online and off. Even though these roles identify each couchsurfer's specific position within a given one-on-one (host and surfer) interaction, many of the behaviors and norms that that have been established by CouchSurfing.org are viewed merely as simple models or suggestions, rather than universalistic ideals and rules to be strictly followed, thereby leaving the majority of interactions to be framed largely as dependent on the host or surfer's cultural backgrounds and personal preferences. This diversity in available expectations and meanings leaves both roles as a launching point for individuals in couchsurfing interactions who will still need to interpret how these roles will be enacted in a given encounter. In other words, couchsurfers engage in role making.

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Goffman's (1959) notion of impression management, which calls attention to the individual's intent to present himself, or herself, in a favorable and positive light in a given social situation, can be seen in nearly every aspect of the couchsurfing experience (both online and off). Since impression management relies on our ability to be able to "present ourselves favorably, we must control what information we emphasize about ourselves and what information we keep secret" (Hewitt and Shulman 2011:67). This issue of self-disclosure and control over the presentation of self can be seen initially in the online aspects of couchsurfing, especially in the creation and maintenance of the user's online public profile. Just like on any traditional social networking website, profiles are constructed completely by the users themselves and each has the power and ability to edit and change any aspect of their own profile, and thus their online identity, at any point in time. The dynamic nature of online profiles has granted couchsurfers a powerful position where everyone holds (near) complete control over personal information shared on the website, giving them the ability to regulate their presentation of self however they best see fit in order to be deemed desirable within the couchsurfing community.

Although individual couchsurfers have the ability to be as truthful and honest (or deceitful and deceptive) as they want, the intent of this online network is to bring about offline interactions. This limits how persons can present themselves on the CouchSurfing.org website, and is significantly different from traditional Internet communities that emphasize anonymity, allowing the users full control over their presentation of self due to the lack of any significant form of social pressure to adhere to their IRL (in real life) identity. Zhao et al. (2008) discuss this difference, emphasizing that the "disembodied" nature of traditional online encounters ". . . enable people to hide their undesired physical features, and anonymity allows individuals to re-create their biography and personality" (Zhao et al. 2008:1818). Couchsurfers cannot afford to exercise this freedom over their online identity, because doing so might jeopardize an important and necessary social element in couchsurfing: expectations of trust.

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If couchsurfing was only an online community a man or woman could, for example, easily present and maintain an identity as the opposite gender because of the lack of physical interaction and signs (vocal pitch and body type) to show otherwise. Couchsurfing typically involves face-to-face interactions that not only cross over into physical space where a person's appearance and behavior matters, but also into the personal space of the host/surfer with whom they are staying. When allowing an individual to stay within this *personal space* (their home), trust must be sustained for interactions to continue. Since a couchsurfer's only knowledge and perceptions (and thus expectations) of the host or surfer prior to their first meeting comes directly from their online public profile, both parties must be largely consistent with the "self" they presented online in order for the interaction to continue successfully and not break down. Therefore, the way couchsurfers' present their self-identity within their online profiles is important to examine because these profiles help form the foundation for trust and other expectations brought into the offline aspects of couchsurfing.

In Goffman's (1961) own participant observation research, he addresses the dynamic nature of social roles by observing "that social worlds and inner lives are not simply there for the looking and the listening. We need to be especially sensitive to the activity that makes them meaningful – meaning making. . ." This is important to consider because people are "involved in literally 'putting on' or performing social worlds. [Goffman] urges us to look closely at the effort that people put into constructing everyday realities. . . stress[ing] the processes by which social worlds and their inner lives are presented, performed, and sustained as everyday realities" (Gubrium and Holstien 2003:12). Following the methodological implications of Goffman's theoretical perspective, in order to best understand the couchsurfing phenomenon, I will try to experience and interpret the interactions that couchsurfers engage in at all levels of the couchsurfing process. From the first step of joining CouchSurfing.org and creating an online profile to taking on the 'surfer' role and undergoing my final stay with another couch surfer, I will actively observe the construction of my own meanings, as well as learning about others'

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meanings through interviews and observations, to reach an understanding of how this population, and the individuals who compose it, create couchsurfing.

3.2 Research Design & Questions

Although a small number of researchers have examined various issues and problems found within the couchsurfing community, many of these studies focused heavily on only one specific aspect of the couchsurfing experience while overlooking many others that are equally important. This has resulted in a mixture of facts, opinions, and conclusions on so many different topics that it is nearly impossible to have a clear and complete understanding of the couchsurfing phenomenon as a whole. It is my intent for this study to expand on the previous couchsurfing literature, while at the same time attempting to bring earlier ideas together and integrate them with my own findings to establish a sociological understanding of the couchsurfing experience by examining it through a lens that integrates the individual forms of agency (motivations, intent, and actions), the structural forces found within the community and its website (norms, rules, and restrictions), and how they are negotiated in host-surfer interactions. The following sections introduce a few of the concepts and themes that the previous literature has described and addressed, as well as other topics that will be explored through the in-depth interviews and participant observations of this study.

Questioning the Couchsurfer - Examining the Individual

By utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews, it was my intent to not only learn about the basic structure of couchsurfing and how it operates but also to examine how couchsurfers view and understand their own experiences and behaviors within the online and offline couchsurfing interactions. Clarifying how the personal interpretations (perceptions and beliefs) of couchsurfers influence their own participation within the community should provide enough information to begin conceptualizing the "couchsurfing experience" through the eyes of those

who actually participate in it. To accomplish this, I openly asked participants questions about their own perceptions and experiences of couchsurfing. Johnson (2002) argues that conducting in-depth interviews that attempt to measure ". . . commonsense perceptions, explanations, and understandings of some lived cultural experience," enables the researcher to ". . . explore the contextual boundaries of that experience or perception, to uncover what is usually hidden from ordinary view or reflection or to penetrate to reflective understandings about the nature of that experience" (p. 106). By designing the interview to be reflexive in this way, the study's questions are likely to benefit the participants by raising topics they may not have thought about or acknowledged before, as well as allow the analysis to spread across a large assortment of themes, concepts, and issues that informants find important to their own life history, motivations, beliefs and interactions within the couchsurfing community. Also, by leaving the interviews open-ended, I was able to hone in more clearly on specific topics and themes as they emerge throughout the study. The interviews was tape recorded, transcribed, and then coded by the researcher for such themes.

Interview Design

Prior to starting each interview, I ensured that the couchsurfer (host or surfer) was ready and willing to participate in the study by discussing how the interview process works. Study participants were informed of their right to stop the interview at anytime, and each person was given a consent form to sign if they wished to continue on with the study (see Appendix A). Also at this time, I gave out a self-administered demographic survey (Appendix B). The pre-interview survey consists of questions regarding the respondents' general characteristics (including but not limited to age, gender, race, and social class) and couchsurfing background (such as the number of previous hosting and surfing experiences). This survey was used to obtain descriptive information about the sample and to help the researcher refine certain questions in the in-depth interviews. For example, if the respondent selected "never" to the

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question about hosting in the past, I could skip hosting questions in the interview guide or re-frame them to work with someone who has only surfed before.

The interview starts off with questions relating to individual life history and goals. (Refer to Appendix C for the Interview Guide). These questions are asked to determine how the participant frames his or her own identity and worldview. I chose not to include any questions directly referencing couchsurfing in this section, thereby allowing participants to illustrate the importance (if any) that couchsurfing has had on their way of life by bringing up this topic themselves. How often they discuss and relate it back to their personal identity and life choices may indicate its importance to their daily life. If some participants make little or no reference to couchsurfing during this series of questions, while others mention it often and talk about couchsurfing as an important aspect of their identity and life, the researcher will be able to classify different types of couchsurfers according to this degree of identity investment. This is similar to the conceptualization of tourists as either *life-tourists* or traditional "*recreational*" tourists (Urry 2002; Bialski 2008). However, starting off the interview with non-couchsurfing related questions may be less revealing because the participants have already been primed to discuss couchsurfing. Since they have already agreed to be interviewed and have taken time out of their day to for the purposes of discussing couchsurfing, they may be more likely respond to general life questions with couchsurfing in mind.

From there, the interview shifts discussion to participants' motivations and intentions for engaging in couchsurfing (the *discovering couchsurfing* section). How a person learns about the existence of couchsurfing is important in determining their initial reactions to it. If, let's say, a friend or family member showed someone the website and discussed how great it was rather than just stumbling on it when surfing across travel websites online, this may impact how they view issues related to couchsurfing (such as safety) or even how they connect to the community (like a friend saying to them "you will get along really well with the people who do this, they are just like you and me"). Identifying this initial mindset and reactions when they first started out

couchsurfing could potentially help in determining the importance that individual motivations have on how couchsurfers overcome some of the problems associated with this community (*barriers* discussed later). By getting participants to think about how they viewed couchsurfing before they really got involved, the participants should be able to describe how their views have changed as they have gained more experience and have become accepted and integrated into the couchsurfing community and culture.

A common problem when asking people to talk about themselves, both inside and outside of a research environment, is that you usually end up only hearing about the more positive and socially acceptable aspects of their experiences and beliefs. This is particularly true for people who are heavily invested in a community, where a *social desirability effect* could be occurring. Because of this potential social pressure they may not want to openly discuss any problems or issues which could shed a negative light on themselves or the community (Fiske 2004:73). In order to gain a more critical perspective on couchsurfing and couchsurfers, I decided to ask a series of questions where I attempt to frame couchsurfers as a generalized "other" by first focusing on how the participant views the "average couchsurfer," then moving on to their perceptions of what makes a person either a *good* (idealized) or *bad* (deviant) couchsurfer. The questions about average couchsurfers will let the interviewee discuss the common characteristics, beliefs, and motivations found amongst the people they have encountered throughout their couchsurfing experiences. All of these questions will emphasize similarities and differences between the participant and those around them, in order to understand how they themselves construct the boundaries between the different types of people found within the community.

Due to CouchSurfing.org's large population and its emphasis on cultural diversity and openness to people who are *different* from oneself, there is a chance that some participants may not even acknowledge that there is an average type of couchsurfer, nor outwardly judge anyone as "good" or "bad" ones. If this is the case, questioning was designed to shift from

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similarities to differences by asking "what makes you all so different?" Probing questions address diversity and culture in order to better understand this perspective, and explore whether they believe fellow couchsurfers from their own culture (Americans) and area (North Texas) are just as varied. This should help illustrate whether diversity concepts, such as open-mindedness to differences, can be attributed more so to engagement in a shared culture than to the individual's own traits and personal lifestyle. Also, depending on how participants responded to all the previous questions, the researcher would be able to determine if, and how, respondents classify themselves relative to the couchsurfers around them (both locally and globally).

If a interviewee overtly identifies with the average couchsurfer image that they constructed, they most likely will view themselves no different from that of the basic beliefs and ideals found within the community (which may, or may not, have been institutionalized by CouchSurfing.org). Since it was initially unknown how, and if, these individuals would demonstrate a critical stance towards couchsurfing in any way, another approach was also used to discover how they frame individuality within the couchsurfing community. Individuals who are strongly committed to a cause or community tend to view their participation as important within that community, which gives the community perceived power in defining the lines between what is the appropriate or correct and inappropriate or wrong ways to perform within the community. Asking the participant to outline the differences between *good* (ideal) and *bad* (deviant) couchsurfers detailed the kinds of behaviors, characteristics, and beliefs that the community emphasizes and labels as good and necessary, or negative and problematic.

When discussing the online aspects of couchsurfing, many of the questions were designed to uncover issues associated with self-disclosure and Goffman's (1959) presentation of self. These questions ask directly about how participants designed their online profiles (and thus how they created their own couchsurfing identity). I believe that how individuals present themselves and what they disclose on the CouchSurfing.org website is highly related to their potential to be selected as a host by a surfer, or allowed to stay after a host looks over their

online profile and couchsurfing request. Therefore, interviews included questions about how participants interpret online profiles, and how the profiles influence whom the interviewee chose as an appropriate host or surfer to couchsurf with. These questions should give a more personalized view of what is important to the respondent in a couchsurfing interaction, rather than the generalized communal view that the "average" and "good versus bad" couchsurfing line of questioning intended to uncover.

Also of interest is how closely connected (or not) the interviewee's own particular preferences and requirements for hosts and surfers may be to the community's view of the host and surfer roles (asked about earlier in the interview). For example, a participant may discuss how a good surfer should always be "clean and take a shower every day," but when describing his own personal experiences discusses how he wishes people would spend less time in the bathroom wasting water or using up all the hot water. These kinds of discrepancies between how the individual acts and how the community frames the ideal view of couchsurfers and couchsurfing demonstrates the importance of the immediate situation and the processes of "making meaning" found within couchsurfing's offline interactions.

At this point in the interview (Q15-27) questions begin to move away from the respondent's perceptions and attitudes towards their fellow couchsurfers and the general couchsurfing community and culture, toward soliciting concrete examples taken from their personal online and offline interactions and experiences. Here, the interview could deviate somewhat from the script depending on how much experience the interviewee had in couchsurfing. There was a significant amount of variation in the level of experience amongst those who were interviewed. Some interviews involved couchsurfers who had only hosted or surfed once before (or never at all), leaving many of the questions marginally irrelevant or un-answerable for the interviewee[1]. In these cases, I only ask the questions or probes that apply to them or re-framed questions in a way that they could answer. For example, instead of posing a

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[1] See the *Offline Experiences* questions (#18-21) in the interview guide (Appendix C).

hosting question to someone who has no experience hosting, the question will be changed to examine their expectations of hosting (or the hosting experiences of their friends or other couchsurfers that they have learned about during their time in the community). Nonetheless, their answers will suggest how couchsurfers interpret the offline and online interactions based on their knowledge and previous experiences (be it their own, or others).

Living the Couchsurfing Lifestyle - Examining Culture Through Observing Interactions

Even though "[i]n-depth interviews aim to gain access into the hidden perceptions of their subjects" (Marvasti 2004:21), the researcher is still limited in knowing only what the interviewee discloses and deems as important and relevant. Therefore, I decided to incorporate elements of participant observation in this study as well. Julian Murchison (2010) urges an ethnographic approach for studying ". . . real-life human behavior and to gain a unique understanding of the context and thought that informs such behavior, " allowing "the researcher to examine how people's actions compare to what they say about their actions in ideal situations and their thoughts or opinions on particular topics. In many cases, actions and behaviors in particular situations differ significantly from those observed or predicted by other research strategies" (Murchison 2010:13). This is especially relevant in my own study, since it has been designed to include in-depth interviews which can be compared to couchsurfers' behaviors and actions observed while out in the field. This contrast between 'what is said' and 'what is done,' allows for "important research questions to emerge as researchers try to account for apparent discrepancies . . ." (Murchison 2010:13) between the spoken interviews and the observed behaviors found within couchsurfing interactions.

During the participant-observation and fieldwork portion of this study, I will "surfed" on participating couchsurfers' couches and attended local group event meet-ups and activities in Dallas/Fort Worth area. Even though the length of stay for a "surfer" is heavily dependent on the "host's" own schedule, research has shown that the average duration of a couchsurfing

interaction/experience is between two and three nights (Bialski 2008:11; Tan 2010:374). Therefore, I decided to limit this portion of my study to couchsurfers who were currently "hosting" and able to let me 'surf' with them for at least two days or more. In keeping with previous participant observation studies of couchsurfing, I participated within the couchsurfing community overtly, with my identity and intent known by all the participants within the study, listed on my online couchsurfing profile, and described in the e-mails sent to potential participants. The data obtained are documented through extensive field notes and tape-recorded discussions (both during the official "interview" and scattered throughout the fieldwork).

By expanding this study to include the lived experiences of selected couchsurfers, I should achieve greater insight and access into the "unknown" and "controlled" aspects that individuals may fail to disclose during interviews. Also, by taking an ethnographic perspective, I was able to observe the subtleties of couchsurfing interactions (such as the first meeting, house rules, living arrangements, daily activities, etc.). Examining couchsurfing at the interactional level is an essential part of understanding and defining the couchsurfing experience, that will provide additional evidence of how involved individuals interpret and construct meaning from their experience.

By implementing an ethnographic approach, a researcher can dynamically examine interactions by focusing on ". . . the social context that guides the interviews in terms of what questions are asked, which people are interviewed, and how their answers are interpreted" (Marvasti 2004:22). This creates a reflexive and dynamic interplay between the researcher and the respondent, which allows not only for greater access and opportunities to gain insights directly from the respondents themselves, but to understand how their social environment helps to form and define behaviors. By actively engaging in the socially situated interactions normally found within couchsurfing and living this phenomenon myself, I was able to observe the many layered facets that all come together to create a greater understanding of the "couchsurfing

experience". Through the process of embedding myself within this community and fitting into their roles and norms, I experienced the same organizational structure and social forces that influence the specific couchsurfing population I am studying, enabling me to see, behave, feel, and think as a couchsurfer. Nonetheless, even with my intentions to engage and conform to the traditional roles and norms of couchsurfing to the best of my ability, I must recognize that my presence as a researcher within this community may influence and bias the subjects and thus this study.

Content Analysis - Examining the Online Aspects of Couchsurfing

Although assorted studies have been conducted on the online aspects of couchsurfing, only Jennie Molz (2007) attempted to aggregate data for a content analysis by examining various hospitality exchange websites (e.g., CouchSurfing.org, HospitalityClub.org, and GlobalFreeloaders.com) to determine how these websites function to create and maintain a 'space' for couchsurfing to occur. Though I found Molz's (2007) conclusions to be fascinating, and influential in the development of my own project, I must still be critical of her findings because she failed to take into consideration individuals' perceptions and beliefs in her analysis. Molz (2007) choose to collect data only from the content presented, selected, and controlled by the owners and authors of the couchsurfing websites themselves (the basic information based pages, user testimonials, and so on) and disregarded any information written by the actual couchsurfers using these websites (such as posts in group forums or even users' online profiles). This resulted in a study that never attempted to test whether its conclusions matched the actual experiences and interactions faced within the couchsurfing community, a pitfall I wanted to avoid in my own study.

Similar to Molz's (2007) study, I focus a portion of my analysis on the direct structure and organization of the CouchSurfing.org website. I will examine how the website defines and addresses issues couchsurfers face through the specific structure and design of the website

itself, where the choices of the webmasters have created mechanisms (e.g., the ratings system) that are used to control and regulate individual users/visitors and their perceptions (e.g., of safety and trust). To accomplish this I examined "*CouchSurfing materials*," by which I refer to any content the webmasters have created or edited, to present as information for the end-user of the website to interpret. This includes webpages such as the front-page of CouchSurfing.org, the FAQ section (Frequently Asked Questions), user testimonials, and most importantly the "about us" and "mission statement" sections of the website. These sections of CouchSurfing.org attempt to lay the foundation of couchsurfing by describing the motivations and intent of its users in fairly direct ways, such as claiming to bring forth "intercultural understandings" and create "inspiring experiences" (CouchSurfing.org 2012). It was unknown just how much influence these 'CouchSurfing materials' have on the community and its members. The website may be utilized by couchsurfers to varying degrees, with some reading and taking to heart every single published page, while others simply jump straight into the website and immediately send out couchsurfing requests without even reading the 'safety warning' on the front page. Nonetheless, CouchSurfing.org must be used to engage in couchsurfing within this community, leaving the website in a very powerful position, potentially institutionalizing a specific view of "couchsurfing" presented by the website's owners and authors.

Since the website is not controlled directly by the couchsurfers themselves but by its founders and their workers, there is the possibility that the way CouchSurfing.org defines and describes couchsurfing may not be directly in line with its users. To understand the individual and community connected by this online environment, it is important to also examine the content created by individual users themselves. This includes all materials found within each couchsurfers personalized public profile, and also the "Community" section of the website (which is where specific user groups are formed and discussions and interactions take place in their own specific group forums). All of the user groups are formed around and dedicated to one specific topic or idea, with each creating their own small and unique online community. These

groups vary greatly in both their member numbers and subject matter, ranging from groups dedicated to people who like "Philosophy" (3,398 members), want to discuss "Alternative Ways of Living and Consuming" (12,211), and even those who want to "Kill Your TV" (1,002). Given that there are currently over three million registered users on CouchSurfing.org, and hundreds if not thousands of groups, most of these groups are so small and limited in scope that they should have little to no bearing on my own study.

But this does not mean that all 'groups' are irrelevant. The largest and most powerful communication device for local couchsurfers to interact is within special "Places" groups tied directly to a specific geographical region or area (e.g., from groups for countries to small cities or towns). The cities and areas I studied has their own 'Places Group'. For example, Fort Worth had over 433 members (though only 152 users appear to be currently active in this area right now). Therefore, these places groups and their open discussions within the forum will be important in understanding and describing the collective issues and ideas working at the local level, while also opening up my own ability to find and engage in local 'group events' (couchsurfing parties and meetings) that will be important during the participant observation period of this study.

Since user profiles are at the heart of CouchSurfing.org's online experience, these profiles must be investigated to grasp the subjective nature of interpreting, and creating, identity in couchsurfing. As with all groups, there is the issue of social structure and individual agency, where the couchsurfer must find a balance between his or her own personal self and identity assessment and social pressures within the community which dictate "proper" self presentation. The structure, roles, and norms of the community come together to create a social environment which reinforces certain beliefs, characteristics, and behaviors that its members must adhere to belong within the community. Even though CouchSurfing.org itself doesn't appear to overtly define who and what an ideal couchsurfer should be, the online profiles may illustrate these ideal characteristics and beliefs by showing that couchsurfers describe themselves in a similar

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way through a shared community discourse (e.g., using keywords such as "open-minded," "outgoing," "friendly," "sociable"). Knowing this common discourse opens the possibility of considering the construction of these online profiles as a form of impression management (Goffman 1959). Couchsurfers must navigate between full personal disclosure and maintaining a online profile that matches the norms found within the structure of the couchsurfing community (and CouchSurfing.org). Participation in couchsurfing necessitates maintaining an image which reinforces the required characteristics and beliefs for inclusion in the community, and offers what other couchsurfers want or need in a potential host or surfer.

To learn how the couchsurfing community influences the way its members frame their own identities, I conducted a content analysis of the participating couchsurfers' online profiles, examining each subsection of these profiles (Personal Description, CouchSurfing Experience, Interests, Philosophy, etc.) looking for similarities and differences in what participants disclosed and discussed about themselves. These profiles were coded for emergent themes found within the text. Online profiles were linked to the in-depth interviews with their authors (the participants). On-line profiles were examined and coded prior to the interviews to establish a basic understanding of the interviewees background in couchsurfing and help create better probing questions. These profiles were then re-examined for further coding after the interview has concluded, taking into consideration the additional information discussed about the creation of his or her couchsurfing profile. Including couchsurfers' interpretations and intent in creating their own, and consuming others', online profiles will fill in gaps found in Molz's (2007) study, previously discussed.

3.3 Data Collection

Since CouchSurfing.org is a hybrid online/offline network, both of these aspects need to be addressed in order to achieve a more complete picture of couchsurfing — including how the online elements influence the offline experience and vice versa. It is important to frame data

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collected through the website content analysis in relation to the findings discovered at the individual level (in-depth interviews) and during the participant observations (interactions) with the participants. Together these data will either help establish validity for the study by reinforcing conclusions drawn from triangulating each dataset and/or illustrating inconsistencies found between what is presented online versus what is practiced offline.

The online nature of couchsurfing allows the researcher to easily contact any of the millions of couchsurfers through the website, but meeting these same people in person and interacting with them is much more difficult. The growing array of internet-based communication tools such as instant messaging and video calling (Skype) has given researchers new methods of accessing and studying global and far reaching populations like those found within couchsurfing. Even with these new means of collecting data, researchers are often limited by their own personal abilities and resources. In my case, things like language and other cultural barriers posed obstacles to competently studying couchsurfing globally.

To facilitate an investigation merging the online and offline aspects of couchsurfing, I decided to examine this population from a more local perspective. This study focused largely on the Dallas/Fort Worth area of North Texas. Using CouchSurfing.org's online tools, I found that as of January 2013 there were a total of 3,967 members with active, searchable profiles in the area depicted by the map below (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Population Map.

By itself, this number fails to give an accurate representation of the number of people couchsurfing in North Texas. When both hosts and surfers are looking at profiles, the most essential part in their interpretation of said profile is the initial instant reaction. This gut feeling is almost completely based upon what the person looks like in his or her profile picture. Literally everyone I spoke to emphasized the importance of pictures, with a profile picture being the most basic requirement for a person to even take the time to look at a profile. Of those who have at least one picture associated with their profile, the 3,967 figure drops down to 2,705. That's over a thousand people (or 31.8%) of couchsurfers from this area who have created a profile yet still have virtually no way of ever hosting or surfing just based on this alone. Since those with profile pictures would be the most likely to actively engage in couchsurfing, I used only these 2,705 individuals as the population being studied. This population, and their individual profiles that were accessible through the CouchSurfing.org website, acted as the sampling frame from which this study's participants were selected.

Originally, I wanted to travel across a larger portion of this area in a way similar to how a traveler would do so — finding hosts and surfers to interview or stay with as I made my way from city to city. During this process I planned to learn more about a handful of each of these city's independent local communities by going to events and gatherings organized by local couchsurfers throughout this area. But I quickly discovered than many of these smaller cities had little or no organized couchsurfing presences. In North Texas, only the Fort Worth and Dallas communities hold regular weekly gatherings that help create a sense of a strong local community. Although I discovered only a small portion of the users found on the website attend these local events, you can typically find a good mixture of people, including those with a large amount of experience and those who are entirely new to couchsurfing. Therefore, I decided to focus my time spent doing participant observation of the local couchsurfing community exclusively the Fort Worth and Dallas areas.

It is common for qualitative studies to collect as much data as possible through interviews and observations until these methods have become exhausted of any new information if continued (Chambliss & Schutt 2013). Therefore it was difficult to anticipate and determine the exact number of participants needed to conduct the present study. I ended up interviewing a total of 19 people from the North Texas couchsurfing population described above. While the majority of the interviewees were centrally located in the three most active locations: Dallas, Fort Worth, and Arlington, a few participants were from more outlying areas of the D/FW metroplex, such as Denton and Plano.

For the first few months, the data collection process included only sit-down interviews with surfers. Once I learned more about couchsurfing, I was able to familiarize myself with the expectations and norms within this community and start my own ethnographic journey. This included not only finding my own hosts and staying with them for two to three days, but also going to local couchsurfing events. In total, I was able to surf five different times, two times in both Fort Worth and Dallas, and once in Denton. My hosts (Harriet, Garrett, Andrew, Harry & Maude[2], and Paul) were also included in the interview process. In the next chapter, "Findings", quotations taken from the interviewees and hosts are relied upon. For a better understanding of the backgrounds of participants, there is a table in "Appendix E" representing demographic information (age, gender) and couchsurfing information (level of experience, role preference, etc.) about each of the participants.

Accounting for the fact that not everyone both surfs and hosts, I planned for about half of my interviews to be with those who preferred hosting while the rest preferred surfing. Looking at a person's profile, it is difficult gauge a person's preference since this is not something typically listed outright on a profile. Therefore I assigned each person to one of two groups, those currently "hosting" within the area (the hosts) and those who were not (the surfers). This led to about half my sample appearing in each category, allowing informative comparisons.

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[2] Harry & Maude were the only couchsurfing couple included in my study. They were interviewed together (and answered the self-administered survey together as well).

A total of 30 emails requesting *interviews* were sent to randomly selected couchsurfers from the Dallas/Fort Worth area. This resulted in a 50% response rate, with 14 interviews granted and one additional person contacting me back denying the request to be interviewed due to personal time constraints. 49 CouchRequests were submitted with 32 responding. Even though the response rate was 64%, finding hosts to surf with was still significantly more difficult than booking interviews.

The high host response rate was due to how CouchSurfing.org shows the percentage of CouchRequests that a individual user responds to on their profile. This greatly influences the response rate since people do not want to feel the negative impact of having a low number of "Couchsurf requests replied to" so prominently displayed on their online profile. Ultimately, over 55% of the people who responded declined my request (18.3%), said 'maybe' (22.4%), or agreed to host me but then eventually canceled (14.2%). So out 49 CouchRequests sent out, only five ended up hosting me (roughly 10%).

In these requests, I revealed my role as a researcher and typically specified a weekend two weeks or so away that I wished to surf with them. I also gave them the opportunity to change the hosting date to a more convenient time if needed. The majority of people took this offer, hosting me anywhere from one weekend later up to as long as two months later.

The interviews conducted during my stay surfing took place at the *host's home* since the researcher and the interviewee were naturally present there. The home is an ideal location for these interviews since this is where a great majority of couchsurfing interactions occur; the home is the normative and most comfortable setting for interviews to take place. Regardless, I also discussed with participants their preferences for a location for the interview that would maximize their comfort level and privacy. I mentioned that arrangements could be made to meet and conduct the interview at a neutral public place (such as UTA or a local coffee shop) if that was preferred.

Data collection occurred during the summer of 2012, over a period lasting from April to mid September. While this specific time frame was not purposely selected by the researcher, summers are the more conventional time for people all over the world to travel. This allowed for more opportunities to meet with and talk to tourists from abroad who were surfing during their stay in the area and also those new to couchsurfing who had recently signed up with the intention of traveling during the summer. Also, couchsurfing is largely comprised of young adults, with those between the ages of 18-24 constituting 35% of the total global population (CouchSurfing.org 2012a). By collecting data over the course of a summer, the study could access student-aged couchsurfers who would be more open to hosting and surfing during this time.

Sampling Techniques

The CouchSurfing.org website has been designed to make it easy for anyone to discover all the different couchsurfers within a given area or territory. The website can be used to create a sampling frame that includes every single couchsurfing "member" within the North Texas population. Access to membership lists such as this are very rarely found for qualitative research. Rather than be forced to find all the participants through sampling methods like snowball sampling or convenience sampling, I implemented simple random sampling to select the couchsurfers (but leaving room for *purposive sampling* to gain access to special cases – like Ambassadors, and couchsurfers who participate in local events/meetups). A random number generator (Random.org) was utilized to select each participant after his or her name was entered into a numbered Excel file. Each of these individuals was sent a message (called a CouchRequest) through the CouchSurfing.org website that asked if they were willing to participate in this study, either as a respondent (in-depth interview) or as a host (interview and observation).

While this approach may not strictly follow the traditional format of simple random sampling found in quantitative studies, it allowed a more representative sample from a diverse community. Given how CouchSurfing.org profiles are designed, most couchsurfers are able to select hosts and surfers who are very similar to themselves. As discussed in the literature review, this becomes problematic for researchers who typically ended up studying couchsurfers who were similar to themselves. By implementing randomization I was able to avoid potential *researcher bias* in subject selection. However, those selected for the sample can still access the researcher's public profile before deciding if they are willing to participate in the study or not. Nonetheless, random selection reduced the chances the sample would be biased and allowed the researcher to measure non-response rate by taking note of those who either declined to participate or never responded to the sent out emails (which is something other couchsurfing studies were unable to do).

The importance of non-response seems to have been neglected in earlier qualitative studies where the intent was not necessarily to generalize to a larger population but to fully describe and understand particular experiences in detail. This study has the advantage of utilizing non-response data by having access to the online profiles of those who were selected but couldn't, or decided not to, participate in the study. Just because these individuals couldn't be interviewed or observed in person does not mean that their presence in couchsurfing should be disregarded. There could be some kind of systematic social process or traits that influenced these individuals to refuse being studied, which in turn could bias the data collected and limit conclusions (particularly if this issue had failed to be recognized.) To determine if non-response is in fact influenced by, and socially situated within the couchsurfing phenomenon (not just "random error" as many researchers treat it), I performed a content analysis of the online profiles of non-respondents to determine if any similarities can be found amongst these subjects (or differences between those who did, and did not, participate), shedding some light on their resistance or inability to be studied for this project.

One drawback of random sampling to gain insights about the most widespread and general experiences in a population is to overlook the more rare and special cases. While these people's experiences may differ vastly from the norm, their stories are meaningful for better understanding couchsurfing. Looking at the exceptions, taking into account their unique perspectives, may also help generate insights about the norms of couchsurfing. Once a preliminary understanding of the normative aspects of couchsurfing was established (using the random sampling technique discussed above), a theoretical sampling was utilized to seek out distinctive aspects and people to interview. This is especially important in exploratory research as its goal is to discover new issues and factors that may impact a given phenomenon.

3.4 Data Analysis

Critics of Grounded Theory such as Gary Thomas and David James (2006) argue that Glaser and Strauss's (1967) method is flawed because it is simply impossible not to hold any preconceptions or biases regarding the topic being studied during the collection and analysis of the data. Nonetheless, when examining and analyzing qualitative data no one has formulated a more systematic approach than that found in the basic formulation of Grounded Theory. Glaser and Stauss's (1967) emphasis on utilizing both inductive and deductive thinking to develop ideas and hypothesises by constantly comparing and re-evaluating information as new data emerges throughout the data collection process applies well in my own focus on collecting and analyzing data from multiple perspectives and sources. Therefore I followed, as has most recent qualitative research, Glaser and Strauss's (1967) basic methods of coding and memoing, using extensive field notes to dynamically discover themes and concepts to propel my investigation as new information emerged throughout the semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and content analysis portions of this study.

To understand a community, it helps to examine what makes this sub-culture different from the overall population. Some of these differences are explicitly defined by the couchsurfing

community, such as the surfer/host roles and the status of being an Ambassador, while others can be seen as dependent on participating individuals and their characteristics, such as those evident on couchsurfers' online profiles (gender, race, etc.). Researchers have already begun to uncover types of variation within the couchsurfing community. Paula Bialski for example, labeled the 'hosts' she studied as "involved" or "uninvolved" hosts (2008:30). I have attempted to expand on her findings and discover other dividing lines amongst couchsurfers that may illuminate how the couchsurfing community regulates and labels those within it. The study implemented a comparative perspective designed to examine differences between the couchsurfer roles of 'Host' or 'Surfer' (their active status and preferred role), level of experience within the community (by number of interactions: low = 0-2; medium = 4-10; high = 10+), gender, race, et cetera. I focused on characteristics that the respondents emphasized as important to their own participation within this community. To do this, I divided couchsurfers into specific groups dependent on characteristics or themes emerging in the coding process. This created groupings and typifications that help identify differences within the couchsurfing community, and allowed the researcher to examine differences and similarities that suggest the diverse forces influencing how participants experience couchsurfing.

3.5 Ethical Considerations & Problems

I believed that ensuring the subject's confidentiality would be very difficult in this study because of the basic principles and policies found on CouchSurfing.org. This community appears to emphasize self-disclosure and forego privacy, placing users in a position where if they want to join and fully participate they are urged to become a "verified" member[3] who must

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[3] Verification is a security mechanism created by CouchSurfing.org where users submit their credit card information and personal address (which is then charged a 'donation fee', which allows for the website to compare the data a person entered onto the website with their bank's information) (CouchSurfing.org 2012).

disclose their full name and identity (including street address and postal code) on their online profile. Since it is customary for couchsurfers to leave a "reference" (rating) on each other's profiles detailing their experiences and opinion about each person with whom they couchsurf, it leaves the researcher's profile open for those within the sample to make comments and disclose information about the research study if they wish. This also placed the study participants' confidentiality at stake because anyone would be able to go to the researcher's profile and see who left a reference. Even though I advised each participant not to write on my public profile, it is impossible to enforce this since it will be outside of my control and solely dependent on the participants. Also, throughout the interviews and the ethnographic fieldwork there was some potential for the participants of the study to know one another due to the fairly small size of the community. To ensure confidentiality during the data collection process, I did not disclosure or share any information about my previous interviews and interactions with anyone else in the community. In writing up my findings throughout the research process I utilized pseudonyms and did not release identifying information regarding any of the participants.

My own safety issues differed slightly from the average couchsurfer. Since the majority of couchsurfers surf when traveling away from home, they are primarily dependent on the host for access to transportation and knowledge about the city, often resulting in a power imbalance between the 'host' and the 'surfer'. This has the potential to limit the guest's ability to leave at will, which could be a problematic issue if the situation were to lead to any disagreements or conflict between the surfer and host. This wasn't as much of an issue for me, having access to my own car and the option to leave by my own will or at the request of the participant, quickly ending my stay and research with that individual. Even though couchsurfers may not view couchsurfing as a risky activity, I believed that it was in both the participants' and my own best interest to take precautions to ensure our safety together (e.g., using CouchSurfing.org's security mechanisms).

I completed the CouchSurfing.org's "verification" process, which would help alleviate any doubts that I was not who I claimed to be (Rory Bradbury) and that I am affiliated with UTA since I signed-up with my student email address which should be publicly visible for anyone to see. Unfortunately, the potential participants were unable to use the reference system to check my previous couchsurfing experiences (due to the issues with confidentiality described earlier), but hopefully my status as a researcher and affiliation with UTA could resolve many of their safety concerns. Nonetheless, I used information from both the verification and reference systems to determine which couchsurfers in the sample are "verified" members and trusted by the community. Those not verified or rated were restricted to only the interview (in a public place) and content analysis portions of this study. Only those who had experience "hosting" and, having gone through CouchSurfing.org's security mechanisms, were vetted by the community were included in the participant observations. Also to ensure personal safety during my travels couchsurfing, I carried a fully charged cell phone with me at all times, equipped with an application (Google Latitude) that sends GPS (global positioning satellite) information to my family members, who then could see my current position in the world at any time.

3.6 Emergent Themes

When starting this project, I spent a great deal of time concentrating on methodology. As previously discussed in this chapter, I decided to approach couchsurfing from a mixed methods perspective utilizing various forms of qualitative data collection and incorporating a multi-level analysis, taking elements from each data collection method and pairing it with a specific level of analysis. For example: Interview data was analyzed at the *individual level*, ethnographic participant observations (surfing and local events) at the *interactional level*, and the content analysis used to describe the larger *structural* and *organizational* forces found on the CouchSurfing.org website. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, these methodological choices greatly assisted in approaching couchsurfing from a broad perspective.

While this multi-leveled methodology was designed to be grounded in various aspects of the couchsurfing experience, I found them interrelated; e.g., interpersonal couchsurfing encounters could not be meaningfully described apart from the context through which these interactions occur. As the data collection process continued, I amassed a couple of hundred pages of interview transcripts, codes, memos, and handwritten notes that addressed a large number of diverse topics and themes, more than could be addressed in a single report of findings. Ultimately this led me to focus on a single detailed aspect of couchsurfing. When data collection and initial coding were complete, I set out to re-examine everything I had written thus far to try to find the thread that connected many similar yet distinct issues and problems.

Previous literature published on couchsurfing had failed to take into consideration the shared experiences of the couchsurfers I observed and had not adequately described the *problems* and *issues* they faced in couchsurfing. After hearing these people's stories and experiencing the same circumstances myself, I could better see the overarching issues that define the problematic nature of couchsurfing. I realized that most aspects of couchsurfing being investigated were specific, small scale issues such as the impact of negative reviews on profiles or the existence of "freeloaders" who use the service but do not reciprocate by hosting or giving back to the community in any way. These facets are important in establishing a basic understanding of the underlining mechanics of couchsurfing, but independently lack a view of the larger social forces and influences that make couchsurfing sociologically important. To divine the larger issues required looking past these smaller aspects of couchsurfing as self-contained problems to what connects them.

Reviewing the top ten codes found in initial coding, similar concepts began to group together and a pattern began to emerge: *Trust, Danger, Privacy,* and *Comfort*. All four were commonly brought up in nearly every aspect of couchsurfing. From walking into the home of a host for the first time to deciding whether or not to hand over a key to your own house, many of these events can generate feelings of slight discomfort or all out fear. These issues act as

barriers which can limit a person's choices about participation in couchsurfing. Each barrier reflects larger sociological forces that not only impact couchsurfers in various ways but non-couchsurfing outsiders as well. The main mechanism to bypass these negative feelings for a couchsurfer is to minimize the potential threat. For example, we can see this in action when couchsurfers spend hours searching and shifting through profiles trying to find the "right" profile, and by *right,* they mean someone who is mutually *trustworthy* and does not raise any negative feelings about the circumstances of their couchsurfing arrangement.

Barriers come together to create to what I call the *problem of participation*. While most couchsurfers hold similar beliefs and lifestyles, there is a large amount of variation in how people choose to participate in this community. Couchsurfing.org relies on its members to host and surf in order to balance out the needs and demands of the network, yet I observed that it is common for participants to choose one of these roles over the other. Being able to couchsurf is very subjective, with everyone having his or her unique needs and wants; and their own views of what constitutes an issue or problem that may limit their participation.

The next chapter of this thesis examines the problem of participation; detailing how participation not only reflects individual motivations and wants, but also barriers such as trust, comfort, privacy, and danger that permeate nearly every aspect of the couchsurfing experience.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

4.1 Barriers to Couchsurfing

Barriers and hurdles are terms commonly used to describe problems people encounter that limit their ability to achieve a desired end. But these words mean more than just that, they correspond to and influence human agency. Barriers exist in many forms, such as actual physical obstacles in a person's environment, but are often driven by social forces. For example, a poor child may grow up in an unsafe environment with a combination of poor nutrition and air pollution that have a significant effect on his or her brain development, adversely influencing future academic achievement. Socioeconomic status of the parents, cheap housing in an industrial area, and governmental policies on health and environmental pollution are all social forces that come together to create added burdens on this child's future. Social forces not only influence our situated environment and life chances, but can impede individual agency to act unrestricted.

In couchsurfing, similarly, social processes and environmental influences can act as barriers to a person's participation. Couchsurfers are highly motivated people who wish to experience the world to the best of their ability. Despite their own individual inclination to engage in couchsurfing, many outside pressures can limit them. Obligations to work and family make it difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to randomly pick up a suitcase and travel on a whim. Even the most dedicated life-tourist who arranges his or her entire life around traveling can face restrictions. If financial resources to accomplish their goals dry up, they may have to focus on a job to earn more money to further an active travel lifestyle. For some, certain social and environmental factors only become barriers as they age and their life situation changes. Others face initial barriers to entry, such as gender, operating as an additional hindrance on

female participation because of perceived safety issues and social norms that disproportionally influence them over men. Although there is a lack of previous research directly focusing on issues in couchsurfing such as this, current research has begun to uncover issues and problems people can face while participating in couchsurfing.

To better understand couchsurfers and their unique place within society, we can examine barriers restraining some individuals from participating. These barriers indicate differences found between the people who can and cannot overcome hurdles to be able to participate in couchsurfing. Researchers such as Jun-E Tan (2010) have already begun to determine how issues such as people's perceptions of "trust" can act as a barrier, especially "given the immense amount of trust needed to admit a stranger to one's home or to enter a foreign territory" (Tan 2010:368).

While current research generally views trust as one of the most crucial aspects of couchsurfing (Lauterbach et al. 2009; Adamic et al. 2011), some studies have discussed additional issues which are important in developing trust in the first place. Peterson and Siek's (2009) research stresses the importance of comfort, discussing how couchsurfers must first be comfortable with disclosing information about themselves in order to establish trust with anyone else on the site. If a person created a profile but is unable to be truthful on it, how can they trust others didn't do the same? They cannot. In this way, lack of comfort acts as a barrier as well. Most other barriers addressed in the research have been commonly attributed to issues regarding a person's "basic security," such as ". . . personal safety, stealing, sexual harassment, and other serious problems" (Zhu 2010:35) — all of which depend greatly on where, and with whom, a couchsurfer will be hosting or surfing.

In the rest of this chapter, I will expand on the research discussed above and attempt to understand how these factors interact to regulate and impact participation in couchsurfing — *trust, comfort, safety and danger*. Did couchsurfers report any of these problems? How did couchsurfers define them as such and give them meaning? What larger sociological forces do

their descriptions point to as contributing factors? Finally, I discuss how they have been able to manage or overcome problems that can sometimes act as barriers to couchsurfing.

<u>4.2 Attitudes Towards Couchsurfing</u>

To understand why barriers to couchsurfing exist in the first place, consider how people react to learning about couchsurfing for the first time. We always hear about the importance of first impressions, how it can lead someone to view you in either a positive or negative light. In the same way initial reactions are very telling. While it is normal to think about how others will interpret us and the things we do, we rarely question why we expect they will react in a certain way. The cornerstone of Charles Cooley's (1902) concept *the looking-glass self* is the ability to imagine how we must appear to others and understand why they will hold a certain judgment of that appearance (Yeung et al. 2003). Believing people will react negatively to behaving in an inappropriate way leads us to stop doing such things — at least in public.

While Cooley's central thesis may be that we develop our self through the judgments of others, the looking-glass self also illustrates that we must already know *how* and *why* people will react in order for it to influence us. For people's imagined judgments/reactions to exist in the first place there has to already be a positive or negative connotation associated with that to which they are reacting. For example, consider negative connotations tied to excessive alcohol consumption. This association could be based on a person's life history that frames it as negative, such as growing up with an alcoholic relative, or a reflection of society's pre-existing stance on the subject manner in general (laws, mores, or norms). While one or the other may influence a given individual to a greater degree, both personal history and societal norms are important in understanding *how* and *why* people react and judge the way they do.

This chapter discusses the ways people typically react, negatively or positively, to hearing about couchsurfing. From there, I will consider *why* people react differently by outlining relevant differences and attempt to trace the origins of the beliefs held about couchsurfing.

How People React: The Tree Common Reactions

From talking to couchsurfers, I found that there are three types of responses that appear to be the most common when discussing couchsurfing with someone for the first time: a negative "Resistant" response, a mixed-emotions "Apprehensive" response, or a positive "Inclined" reaction. These reactions express the different ways outsiders tend to immediately perceive couchsurfing, and illustrate the apparent dividing line between those who are already resistant and those willing to try it. Garrett, a veteran couchsurfer who has hosted dozens of times, described how he has typically seen others react:

> I get one of three reactions. The <u>first</u> one is [The Apprehensive]: "Really? You're just staying with people you've never met before? I couldn't do that!" They are like, "It's so cool but I just can't do that, I'm not comfortable with letting someone in my home or going into somebody else's home. I just can't do that, I'm uncomfortable with that". The <u>second</u> is [The Resistant]: "That is weird. That is just weird!" No, you are weird. And the <u>third</u> is [The Inclined]: "That's really interesting, you've got to tell me more about this thing!". . . I've probably brought around twenty people to the site just because of it. They may use it, and they may not. But they've bought onto the concept of it. Yeah, you get three different reactions from what I've seen. - Garrett

It is important to realize that the reactions Garrett is discussing focus directly on entry related barriers. The first barrier that everyone faces is the 'idea' of personally participating in couchsurfing, where they must ask themselves, "Can I even do this"? Both the Resistant outsiders and the Inclined couchsurfers alike tend to view this question in a fairly black or white manner. Either they want to do it or they don't, simple as that. On one side you have the outsiders who are completely resistant to the idea of couchsurfing. Not only do they personally choose not to become involved for their own personal reasons (such as lack of 'comfort'), they typically don't show any signs of understanding or empathy about why a person would even want to do such a thing, quickly labeling couchsurfers as a weird or strange group. This is a completely opposite reaction from what I found with most couchsurfers, who are not only attracted to the idea of couchsurfing at first sight (Inclined) but almost never mention any sort of problems or issues with the idea at all. If anything, this group fails to realize the potential problems until they have been put into a situation where they become problematic for them.

These extreme initial reactions show how powerful barriers can be; one person is completely stopped in his or her tracks while another can easily pass along unfazed and unhindered.

Only the Apprehensive tend to show any signs of conflict or doubt in their biases and assumptions regarding couchsurfing. This group mixes in the motivations and wanderlust of travel seen for the Inclined, while also understanding and feeling the concerns of the Resistant outsiders. They lack the extreme initial reactions that pull them to one side or the other. The question "can I even do this?" does not have a simple, yes or no, answer for them; if anything, this question leads to many more.

How people react to hearing about couchsurfing is an important way to gauge how likely someone is to couchsurf. At this moment in time they decide whether or not couchsurfing is a viable option for them to use while traveling, self-selecting themselves in or out of this activity. Of the three categories of initial reactions discussed, only the Resistant do this completely. Their focus on the apparent safety concerns and dangers of couchsurfing has alienated them from the idea before even hearing more about it or trying it out themselves. It could be argued that those who react very positively (the Inclined) self-selected themselves as much into couchsurfing as those who are (Resistant) to the idea choose to exclude themselves. But seeing couchsurfing in a positive light and wanting to do it are two separate ideas. There are people who may hear about couchsurfing, think, "that's a really cool idea," and say, "it sounds fun," but unless they are driven to actually go out and host or surf, their positive reaction will have no bearing on actually engaging in couchsurfing since people must be motivated to overcome any issues or problems that are stopping them. In theory, it is possible for *anyone*, no matter their initial reactions, to become a couchsurfer. However, the difficulty of overcoming such barriers is highly dependent on these initial reactions.

The majority of couchsurfers I encountered discussed initially reacting somewhere in the spectrum from highly '*apprehensive* with many doubts' to totally '*inclined* and willing to couchsurf with no problems whatsoever.'   Actual participation is highly personalized. While

there are commonalities in what motivates or restricts people from engaging in couchsurfing, it is ultimately up to each individual to determine which factors are most important or problematic for them. Since barriers affect couchsurfers in varying degrees, I concluded that barriers are highly personalized and may change over time as a person is exposed further to couchsurfing.

Why People React: Tracing The (3) Reactions

As a subculture, couchsurfing can be studied by simply examining its unique roles, rules, and norms. By focusing on these structural elements it may seem as though couchsurfing acts as a self-contained entity, but couchsurfing does not exist apart from the greater society. Distinct social influences occur *within* and *through* the act of couchsurfing but powerful outside social pressures do influence prospective couchsurfers. The reactions discussed earlier are not tied only to personal biases and beliefs, but reflect the society and culture in which these individuals are situated.

Many commonly held assumptions and beliefs in American society, such as the distrust of strangers, can be a large obstacle to couchsurfing, generating feelings of fear and doubt that leave individuals hesitant to participate. Personal choice and motivations are central to understanding how and why people wish to engage in couchsurfing even with the looming dangers and problems commonly associated with it. Couchsurfers choose to surf and/or host despite these issues, yet others with similar motivations fail to overcome these barriers. Barriers are tied to beliefs. Where do these feelings and beliefs originate? What social forces impede a person's chances of participating in the first place but also with what impact, if any, on those who do couchsurf? And most importantly, what draws people into couchsurfing in spite of this?

The next section shows how couchsurfers attitudes towards specific barriers develop, and compares them with those outside of couchsurfing (Resistant) and those who only want to look in (Apprehensive).

The Resistant: Bounded by Fear?

Couchsurfing can appear to be a fairly foreign concept that people may have a hard time understanding or connecting with. The idea of traveling to anyplace in the world, showing up at the door of someone you have never met before, and then sleeping on their couch for a few nights can sound fairly strange or weird, if not outright crazy or absurd. It is not uncommon for couchsurfers to hear people say things such as:

- "How can you go stay with a stranger? What if they are a bad person? What if they try to do something? What if they try to rob you? What if they kill you? . . ." - Harriet

- Oh, a lot of people think I'm crazy. They are like "really?, you're going to go sleep on the couch of a stranger?" — Amber

- "'OH-MY-GOD! Are you out of your mind?' [pauses] and that's pretty much the reaction I still get (laughs)" - Betty

- A lot of people hear 'couchsurfing' and you have to explain it to them and they're like, "why would you stay with strangers? Like what's wrong with you?" but that never really crossed my mind. — Faye

These responses fall anywhere between basic concerns to outright judgments about the couchsurfer. Nearly all of these thoughts are directly related to the potential safety issues related to trusting a stranger.

The "what if" questions Harriet was posed almost always arise when 'couchsurfing' is brought up around those who have never heard of it before, especially for people who think about the worst-case scenarios immediately. Not only do these people question the safety of couchsurfing, but sometimes even its legitimacy. One of my own friends asked if it was some kind of "sex thing." For him at least, CouchSurfing.org being a "front" for some kind of elaborate sex network was more believable than the idea of a person traveling halfway across the world and sleeping on someone's couch for a few days. For the Resistant, couchsurfing is seen as something no normal rational human being could do. People tend to name others with labels like 'crazy' when they not only fail to follow a specific norm but their behavior actively goes against such norms. As I heard more and more couchsurfers talk about people reacting this

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way, I began to question whether people really reacted negatively simply on the grounds that it seems so dangerous to them. Are they concerned for the well-being of the surfer or host or are other issues at play here?

Negative reactions appeared to be gendered. I found that women commonly brought up situations involving people reacting negatively to their involvement with couchsurfing, typically citing the reactions quoted above. On the other hand, men typically glossed over these questions by only discussing how some people 'just didn't get it' or 'wasn't their thing', but never really went into depth about how people felt about them using couchsurfing. Men were rarely, if ever, directly called out for participating in such a "dangerous" and "unsafe" activity. Only their family members brought up such concerns with them, yet women would commonly find their participation questioned even by strangers. This led some women to conceal their role as a couchsurfer to anyone outside of the organization, even their friends and family. In the eyes of the general public, couchsurfing can be seen as a dangerous activity with lots of risks involved, fine in the traditional purview of men but unacceptable for women to engage in. This lead me to believe that society judges women much more harshly when it comes to couchsurfing.

The Impact of Reacting Negatively

I experienced similar negative feedback once I decided to write about couchsurfing for my thesis. I recall having to go through many similar discussions with the people in my life as I explained not only what couchsurfing was, but also why I was studying it and how I would be safe doing so. As stated earlier, the initial impressions of couchsurfing are not always positive. When I told my mom she had a similar reaction to most, but her concerns extended beyond just questioning the legitimacy and safety of couchsurfing than friends or acquaintances seem to acknowledge. Just like the parents of the other couchsurfers I spoke to, she worried more about my actual physical safety than I did.

It was not until I began the process of getting the project approved by my university that I realized just how dangerous and problematic some people would find couchsurfing. Initially, I expected there would be at least some concern about my personal safety from my family, friends, and even members of my thesis committee, but nothing too much that it would actually affect my plans to surf with various hosts throughout the North Texas area.

A few weeks after submitting my project for IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval, I received a phone call from one of its members informing me that there may be a few problems with my research project. My immediate thoughts went directly to my methodology, was there something in there that I missed and didn't realize was unethical? It was something entirely else. Danger. The IRB member called to tell me she was worried about my personal safety, explaining how she was uncomfortable signing off on the project because she didn't want to wake up one day and read in the newspaper that I had been murdered. This isn't a normal IRB phone call, ethics wasn't the issue here. She feared for my life. I told her "thank you" for all her concerns, then did my best to explain all the safety precautions found on the CouchSurfing.org website and even detailed the additional ones I had planned to make on my own: only surf places where I had access to my car (for quick getaways, if necessary), GPS app on my smart phone that showed my family members where I was at all times. Even after all these explanations, the IRB member was still very much against the idea of me doing this project. This ultimately led to me to meeting with the entire IRB committee and defending my project. I simply reiterated what I had said on the phone initially, laying out all the precautions. They voted, no issues were found and I forged ahead.

Looking back, it was that moment I hung up the phone with the IRB member that I first realized how dangerous and scary the idea of couchsurfing could be to some people. You have to explain to people, convince them, that couchsurfing is safe. Many couchsurfers fall into a similar position, where they have to rationalize their choice to couchsurf and not only explain, but convince, those around them that couchsurfing is an acceptable way to travel.

I have heard many couchsurfers tell stories about how difficult it can be at times to explain to someone what exactly couchsurfing is all about. They attempt to introduce the concept of couchsurfing as briefly and easily as possible, fielding questions or concerns that a person may have about it. This often leads the couchsurfer to bring up many of the safety features that exist on the site in an attempt to help resolve danger and safety concerns that people may have. Even after taking the time to explain these things, it seems to the informants that most people still walk away doubtful.

> [When] most people react at first, it's kind of a shocking thing. . . Cause I think people will read about it and be like "Couchsurfing? That's a crazy idea!"And so that sort of thing. (pauses) It's just weird, you-know? . . . Then when you explain, they warm up to the idea. . . when you tell them about couchsurfing and they've never heard of it and they're like "Really?" They don't get it. Then they are like, "That's kind of cool." (pauses) I don't know. They are always kind of hesitant. — Ethan

Even though there are some very enticing benefits to couchsurfing, cheaper travel or a local perspective on the city you are visiting, there seem to be obstacles holding back even the more interested people. They talk about how it sounds like a 'really cool idea' but just cannot see themselves ever being able to actually go out there and do it. These are usually the same people who ask the most questions and are very intrigued to learn more but show little or no motivation to actually do so. But for the Resistant, they cannot get past this initial reaction..

Culture of Fear

During the interviews, I asked respondents why they thought so many people react negatively to couchsurfing. There was a wide array of explanations for this, from basic living standards to personal comfort and privacy concerns. But the underlining issue that arose time and time again was that most people are simply too afraid to even try couchsurfing.

> Most people, if, if you hear about people who do it, then they immediately go up on the defensive. And that's okay, because everyone wants to protect themselves and everyone is concerned about safety, especially in this day and age. When it seems like 'anything can happen anywhere', you-know? You always hear every horror story because the news is everywhere. So, I don't think there is any problem with it. - Amber

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Some theorists and authors argue that America itself is a culture based on fear. Three out of every four people in America say that they are more fearful today than they were twenty years ago. This statistic has led some social theorists to characterize America as being based upon a *culture of fear* (Furedi 1997; Glassner 2009). In his book, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Thing*s, sociologist Barry Glassner (2009) discusses how over the last few decades America has reached a point where certain people and organizations, such as the mass media, not only profit and feed off the fears of the general public, but reinforce them as well. He argues it is only our perceptions of danger that have increased and not the actual level of risk involved in day-to-day life (Glassner 2009).

When discussing the dangers which instill fear among the Resistant, each couchsurfer would pose the question "What is *not* dangerous?", bringing up examples ranging from driving a car to skydiving. Glassner (2009) found Americans tend to over-represent the dangers in their lives and couchsurfers see this as well, but in even more extreme terms. They believe that risks and dangers are present in everything we do. Therefore potential risks shouldn't completely deter people from trying anything out, or else we would all be too scared and worried to even do the most mundane of tasks.

> When you do anything in life, you are taking a chance. It doesn't matter what, you get in your car you can get in a car wreck. So yes, couchsurfing is taking a chance. You are taking a chance on whoever you are hosting is also going to be someone that you will enjoy having over to your house but what's the point of living if you don't take any chances. That's no fun either. — Paul

> Same with like blind dates or going hunting. You take risks. When you get in your car, take an airplane ride.   You are taking risks. So, do you want to not take the risk and not go anywhere or do you want to have an experience that you will never have again by taking that risk. You take precautions but you also have to take a risk. — Kimberly

Since so much attention is placed on the fears of the public, it's surprising how such a thing as couchsurfing can remain intact in the presence of these doubts. I know growing up in the 'stranger danger' generation, I personally felt these pressures. Parents, teachers, and the media, everyone reinforced the idea that anyone and everyone could potentially harm me in

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some way. It was taught in school, embedded in my mind, as we practiced drills of how to handle "the stranger." This seems to be an even larger hoop to jump through for most people in today's post 9/11 American culture.

This culture of fear theory is an apt explanation of Americans' views about couchsurfing, but where does this idea fit in with other cultures/countries involved with couchsurfing? Do they fall victim to these ideas and reject couchsurfing as well? The present study limits its analysis only to a small portion of the American population. I kept in mind that the barriers described here may not exist cross culturally. Through my own time couchsurfing and going to local events I did encounter around a dozen people from across the globe. What I took away from my brief conversations with these people were the subtle differences they saw between how their own home culture and America typically views couchsurfing. To my surprise everything they said was nearly word-for-word what I had been hearing from those around me. Criticism of their own culture for lacking an openness to the idea of couchsurfing, all while praising other cultures and countries for being much more accepting than the place they live. At one couchsurfing event I was lucky enough to overhear two men, one from America and the other from France, both attempting to praise one another's country for being so much more open to the idea of couchsurfing. But neither agreed, citing their own unique reasons why the majority of their own people shunned the idea of couchsurfing. American couchsurfers claiming Americans are too afraid, European couchsurfers claiming their fellow Europeans are not open-minded enough and Asian couchsurfers objecting to their strict cultural social norms on interacting with foreigners.

Currently, couchsurfing appears to be an alternative form of tourism no matter where you go in the world. The reactions are similar; the only difference is the reasons for why couchsurfing is rejected in their culture. Further research is needed in order to understand these subtle differences which can act as cultural barriers not only for those within the country the

couchsurfer resides in, but also the additional barriers that may interfere with people's ability to successfully couchsurf cross-culturally.

The Apprehensive: Can They Couchsurf?

This category of potential couchsurfer appeared to be the most common, and provides an interesting amalgamation of the negative and positive aspects commonly found within the other two groups (*Resistant* and *Inclined*). At first I thought this group would consist only of those people who outwardly expressed negative concerns about couchsurfing yet over time were able to surpass these issues for themselves. But as I began to learn about the many different ways people could participate within couchsurfing, such as solely hosting or only going to local events, I realized that not every barrier *had* to be overcome and dealt with in order to participate.

For example, Betty told me about how she only hosts people since she is uncomfortable with not knowing all the circumstances of what is expected of her while staying in another person's home. Couchsurfing has always been very dependent on the personality of the host; some have strict rules posted on their online profile that you must follow, while others take a more laissez faire approach to hosting. Often though, a person's hosting style isn't always clearly defined on their profile or during the initial online interactions between the hosts and surfer. This has ultimately required the surfer to be much more flexible than someone in the host role. There is also the idea of being a burden and having to rely on someone else that makes some people uncomfortable as well. For Betty, she has not been able to overcome this issue of flexibility and is only able to host people in an environment where she is comfortable, her home. She did not break down this barrier, only compartmentalized it. Being hesitant and apprehensive about certain specific parts of the couchsurfing experience separates the *Apprehensive* from the more ideal *Inclined* couchsurfers. Although Betty is clearly able to

couchsurf, others who are attracted to couchsurfing may not be able to bypass, or compartmentalize, their issues with it enough to enable any participation.

The Dreamers

It is impossible to know for certain how many people are unwilling to sign up for couchsurfing, but by looking at all the public couchsurfing profiles in the North Texas area I could determine the number of people who sign up to the site but never end up using it. After sampling from all the profiles in this area (3,591), I discovered that 31.3% of users fall into this category. Having so many people who are interested and signed up but never, or at least not yet, tried it out is striking. Some kinds of social, environmental, or even economic factors at play have made it difficult for a large proportion to be unable to participate. Luckily, I had *access* (through the CouchSurfing.org website) to contact these people and question them about why they have been unable to couchsurf. I did so with the intent to discover if they too were deterred by the potential danger and safety issues or faced different problems. Knowing why they haven't been able to couchsurf should shed more light on the boundary between being open to couchsurfing and not open to it at all.

I found a number of non-practicing cases that exemplified this problem. These were people who registered with the site anywhere from two to five years ago but still haven't gone to a local couchsurfing event or hosted/surfed with anyone yet. I could understand waiting a few months to a year because not everyone gets an opportunity to travel that often. Additionally, couchsurfers tend to travel longer and further away from home, all which requires more time preparation and investment. But waiting for such a long period of time, never going to any local couchsurfing events or anything is perplexing. These people decided to sign up, and then keep checking the site (sometimes for years), before either stopping and giving up trying to couchsurf, or finally 'just do it'. I believe this leaves these people in a distinctly separate place from anyone else associated with couchsurfing. I call this group of people the Dreamers; they

are not couchsurfers yet, and may never be, but they still wish to do it. Unlike the other Apprehensive users who were able to pick and choose the aspects of couchsurfing which worked best for them, this group had troubles even making their first steps into the couchsurfing community. What makes these dreamers different? Is something holding them back even more, what is it?

To answer this question, I decided to only contact individuals who first created their profiles over three years ago. To maximize the potential response rate, I only sent out messages to people who had logged into the site within the past two months. I sent out messages to a total of eighteen people.

Below is the email with the information and questions I posed to them:

My name is Rory Bradbury and right now I am in the process of writing a thesis about CouchSurfing for my master's degree in sociology! Do you mind if I ask you a quick question? ;)

Looking at the local DFW couchsurfing users, I found that roughly 30% of the people who sign up for the site in this area don't have any references. It is as if these people sign up on the site but never end up couchsurfing at all! What makes this figure even more fascinating is that this isn't your normal "create a profile on some random website then just forget about it", it is actually quite the opposite. Many of these people still login and check the website over a period of months to years later from when they signed up. But they never host, never surf... at least not yet! What are they waiting for?

I see that from your profile you kind of fall into this situation too. You haven't hosted or surfed since signing up, that was way back in [year of profile creation]! I am just wondering why haven't you couchsurfed yet? lol.

Also, why do you think so many people don't end up couchsurfing anyways? A little less than half never end up going through with it! They are obviously interested in trying out couchsurfing since they signed up for the site... what is stopping them from getting out there and just doing it?

Thanks for helping me out,
Rory.

Of the eighteen to whom I sent this message, eight responded (44.4% response rate). All their answers brought up some type of barrier that had made it difficult, or virtually impossible, to couchsurf so far. Many times this included mundane situations that have been overlooked in literature on couchsurfing so far, such as: lack of requests (not living in a good

tourist location), living situation (have roommates or not enough room to host), lack of opportunities to travel, or no necessity to surf so far (can stay in a hotel or have friends to stay with). Below is a good example:

> The reason I have not hosted is very simple, I have had only two requests since signing up. The area I live in is probably not very convenient to those who are looking for a spot they can come to and go out and explore the city. *Maybe I could do more in reaching out to others* but that's something I have done once but I get little if not nothing back from the person requesting. Since 2005, when I signed up, I started to slow down quite a bit in the way of traveling. I had a professional job, a house to maintain and a dog to care for. I more or less signed up because I missed what I had done in the past. I gave it up for a career and when vacation time came, I would go places but make my arrangements with a motel, hotel, inn, whatever was the cheapest route at that time.
> I think people many people don't wind up couchsurfing for a couple of reasons. *Speaking personally, I don't want to be a bother to someone.* When I'm out to explore, the hours I have can be quite varied. Depending on the city, I could be up very early, or out very late. As for having someone stay with me, *I fear being too trusting of people I do not know* — Ned, 33 years old, member since 2005. [emphasis added]

Those who gave more logistical answers to this question would typically describe their situation with concrete examples (as in the case above). Yet these types of answers only tell half of the story. For Ned, who had been a member since 2005 most of his reasons for not couchsurfing are due to circumstances more or less beyond his control. He is in a situation where it is difficult to couchsurf, but not necessarily impossible. Effort and motivation are important factors; e.g., people make time when driven to do so. He wrote about reaching out to another couchsurfer once, but was unsuccessful at getting a response. It is common to hear couchsurfers talk about having to 'put yourself out there' and put a lot effort into getting references and meeting other couchsurfers. Not seriously attempting to contact other couchsurfers reflects important underlining issues rather than mere logistics/practicalities. As another person simply answered, "Honestly, it probably comes down to fear of the unknown at the root. I LOVE the idea, but I've had a hard time committing to actually DOING it" — Alex, 42, member since 2007.

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Going back to the lengthier example, in the last paragraph Ned does begin to express a few more personal beliefs and feelings (italicized) that illustrate how the couchsurfing host-surfer interaction may affect him or the host negatively in some way. He is uncomfortable with staying with hosts because he doesn't want to be a burden for them. At the end, he brings up the fear of being too trusting towards strangers. Taken together, this begins to show how social pressures create doubt, discomfort, and even fear based on the lack of grounded expectations associated with couchsurfing interactions (recall that none of these people have any couchsurfing experience whatsoever). Never going to any events where they could communicate with other couchsurfers and hear about their experiences has left many of these people on their own with their doubts about potential problematic 'what-if' scenarios, allowing the fear and doubt to become barriers to actual participation.

In the end, even with the motivations to drive them to take at least a few small actions (signing up for the website, messaging other users, sending out CouchRequests, et cetera) they were still unable to make it all work out. But surprisingly, the major issues discussed by these individuals did not completely match the reasons the Resistant outsiders gave previously. The only case that overtly mentioned the *dangerous* aspects of couchsurfing was one woman, who expressed concerns about male hosts who could potentially take advantage of her in some way. Nonetheless, the majority of these people gave fairly straight forward logistical and practical issues holding them back, as well as reinforcing many of the concerns about personal comfort and trust related issues I found while writing my literature review. All in all, it appears that these people, and presumably the Inclined couchsurfers I will discuss next, are affected by barriers working in separate but not completely distinct levels: *outsider barriers* (typically safety and danger), *internal barriers* (comfort, privacy, self-disclosure), or *participation barriers* that rely on establishing a connect to others through participation in couchsurfing (e.g. the development of trust). Each of these types of barriers will be further discussed throughout this chapter.

The Inclined: Different From The Rest?

Of all these categories of people discussed, the Inclined are the most receptive to the idea of couchsurfing. Not only are they immediately drawn to it and want to try it out, but they also see parallels to other similar activities they have done in the past. It was not uncommon to hear someone say, "I was couchsurfing way before I even knew what couchsurfing was!" Most had past experiences traveling with and/or staying with people who they didn't know very well, if at all, such as friends-of-friends or people randomly encountered while sightseeing. Even if they have never done such a thing before, most have at least thought about or done something similar enough at least once; be it hitchhiking, backpacking, rideshares, or house sitting. Being open to these types of activities shows how their *inclinations* allow them to become a couchsurfer. For the Inclined, the idea of going out and sleeping on a stranger's couch for a few days was more or less normal to their lifestyle.

Thinking of the old adage, "birds of a feather flock together," I hypothesized that couchsurfers would know a lot more people within their daily social life that would be more open to couchsurfing than the general public. We surround ourselves with like-minded people who enjoy doing similar things we do; a shared lifestyle. I assumed that couchsurfers' friends and family members would be couchsurfers as well. This ended up not being the case at all. Most couchsurfers would tell me about how the majority of their friends are either fairly 'resistant' to the idea, or completely disinterested (lacking the motivation necessary to overcome the potential barriers). About one-third of my sample discussed having at least one friend or family member who was interested but still hesitant.

In nearly all of these cases the couchsurfer had attempted to establish a friend within the couchsurfing community in some way, such as helping create their online profile or by taking them to a local couchsurfing event to meet other couchsurfers. But by and large, most friends never got past these initial steps. There is no way to determine what the contributing factor was that caused these people to drop-out (or never really begin in the first place). Were they only

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slightly interested in the idea and their friendship with the couchsurfer pushed them to give it more of a go than they would if they were on their own? Or were they not comfortable enough with the idea from the onset and were unable to overcome their own personal barriers of participation? While these are all good questions, without access to these people we are left with nothing more than mere speculation. But, if we were to turn our attention to the couchsurfer and ask "what makes a couchsurfer so different from their friends?" we may be able to address this conundrum.

So did any of your friends think this was a good idea? Or were willing to do this with you?

None. None of my non-couchsurfing friends really wanted to, get into the idea. [pause] There are some of them - some people that I meet on traveling, I tell about it and they want to do it. But some people - you kind of already have to be in the *travel mindset*, I think. [pause] You already kind of *have to want to be adventurous*... not everyone is, and that is fine. [pause] I mean - I don't know. A lot of people that I know that I tell about it, they set up profiles. But they didn't really use it for traveling, *they kind of thought they would just feel it out - and some people do feel it out and find out it's not for them.* — Amber (emphasis added)

Here, Amber describes what she considers to be the main characteristics necessary to become a couchsurfer. [1] A travel mindset and [2] being adventurous. Even though most couchsurfers I spoke to had friends who traveled as well (sometimes even together - never couchsurfing), they did so nowhere near as often as the couchsurfer liked too. Interestingly enough, I believe this difference in rates of travel with their friends may lead some people to be forced to travel alone and therefore rely on organizations like CouchSurfing.org to find travel partners. A big difference might be that couchsurfers actively seek out more adventurous tourist destinations, unlike many of their friends and family members, who would stick to more traditional means of tourism.

Do you have any friends who couchsurf too?

Um, some of my friends thought it was really cool, none of them actually have ever joined . . . I think, out of my group of friends *I am probably the most open-minded and traveled already.* But some of my friends thought it was a really cool idea, they just wouldn't do it themselves. — Lacey

When talking about the people directly in their social circle around them, open-mindedness was a key differentiator. At no time did I hear anyone complain about their friends being bigoted or stuck in their own ways, which is commonly tied to being anti-open-minded. But when it came to couchsurfing at least, they were viewed as being closed off, interested but unwilling. Interestingly enough, every time that I surfed I would always get to meet and hangout with a few of my host's personal friends. During the interviews, my hosts would always bring up their friends that I would probably meet during the next few days with him or her. Each host would explain how all their friends are really friendly and cool people, but also making sure to point out that their friends would never do anything like couchsurfing.

When speaking to my host's friends myself, I found out that many considered themselves to actually be more open to the idea than my host had led on. It's impossible for me to know for certain if they told me they were interested since they knew I was a "couchsurfer" and/or "researcher" and wanted to be nice, or completely sincere in how they truly felt. Nonetheless, many discussed similar pressures and problems as many people who are Apprehensive do. Even though I was a stranger to all of my host's friends, they were still willing to allow me into their lives as well. I went with my host to some of their homes to visit with them, celebrated birthdays, interacted with their children, and even once slept in the same room with a few of them who were staying at my host's house at the same time as me. This made me realize that these individuals may have more in common with those who are Apprehensive than their couchsurfing friend realized, especially considering how they interacted with me, a stranger. I can see how they too could be comfortable with only certain aspects of couchsurfing, unlike my host, who was almost always very invested in the idea and had experience with both hosting and surfing.

When thinking about what made the host different from others, it is that he more closely matched what is considered the *ideal couchsurfer*. Ideal couchsurfers are not limited by barriers that force them to prefer participating in couchsurfing one way over another (i.e., being a host

vs. a surfer). What may keep them from ever couchsurfing is not knowing such a community exists. Even without ever learning about CouchSurfing.org or other similar hospitality networks, these people could seek out couchsurfing-like ways to travel and experience the world. As opposed to Apprehensive couchsurfers, couchsurfing is directly appealing to the Inclined. Although barriers can still arise for these individuals, these barriers tend to be more temporary logistical problems (such as not having the space to host, or enough time/money to surf) rather than more personalized issues like fear of danger or feelings of discomfort. Those who fall into the Inclined category are theoretically able to completely participate in every aspect of couchsurfing without restraint. But then again, the average couchsurfer will not be able to perfectly fit into this idealistic perspective.

Navigating the Differences Between Being Resistant, Apprehensive, or Inclined

Is it possible for someone to react negatively to couchsurfing at first then to change their mind and try it out eventually? While I found many cases where there were at least some reservations about the dangers associated with couchsurfing, everyone I interviewed still viewed couchsurfing in a very positive light. For them, it is impossible for those resistant to couchsurfing to overcome their own barriers and become active couchsurfers. I found that they pointed out two different reasons for resistance to couchsurfing: [1] *personal lifestyle* standards and choices which are simply incompatible with couchsurfing, or [2] couchsurfing goes against the basic nature of their *worldview*. Although both these ideas are interrelated - how we view the world typically impacts how we choose to behave (and vice versa), one is grounded in a more situational context while the other is closely tied to personal identity and ideological beliefs. These differences are important in recognizing how couchsurfers view those who are unlike them. Also, if couchsurfers themselves share the same larger cultural context, they demonstrate that it is possible to overcome such barriers.

When discussing how someone's personal lifestyle standards could potentially be problematic, the couchsurfers often mentioned hearing tangible excuses like wanting their own private room and bed to be comfortable enough to get a good night's rest. For the Resistant, it only takes something as small as this to create a barrier than could act as an impenetrable wall that could not be overcome. This differs from the average couchsurfer, who also has his or her own personal preferences; they want (but do not necessarily need) a certain level of amenities to be comfortable. The interviewees would usually just dismiss these people's problems, believing they just didn't have the right kind of *personality* necessary to couchsurf. They also spoke of characteristics like being a private person, introverted, or lacking open-mindedness as being incompatible with the couchsurfing lifestyle.

> Anytime that you talk to anyone new about couchsurfing, they say "what!?" (pauses) but I think- I don't know, what can you say? Either you're open to something like this, or you're not. People would say "oh, that's a really cool idea. But I don't think I could ever do that"... okay, then don't! (laughs) — Betty.

Every community and organization has both overt and covert ways to control entry into its group. While those resistant to couchsurfing almost always self-select themselves out, couchsurfers still maintain perceptions of what is necessary to be able to become a couchsurfer (certain characteristics, personality, or even ideological beliefs). Surprisingly, I found there were even a few couchsurfers who felt they themselves didn't always fit neatly into all the situations they found themselves in while couchsurfing. Since couchsurfers like these, whose personality traits or beliefs don't fully conform to the ideal couchsurfing stereotype still participate, specific traits do not necessarily dictate how a given person would respond to, or overcome potential barriers related to couchsurfing.

Though many problems are situational and can be dealt with or changed depending on the circumstances of the couchsurfing event, many outsiders lack the motivation or effort to put themselves into such a situation, unlike the two oldest participants I interviewed, Dan and Betty, both in their 60s, who mentioned that people their age are 'too stuck in their ways' to go out and try something as new and exciting as couchsurfing.

Couchsurfers typically expressed their own concerns about how those resistant to the idea of couchsurfing reacted to their participation within the community. For the most part, couchsurfers talked about the Resistant as outsiders who do not, and cannot, understand the appeal of couchsurfing. For many couchsurfers, it is as though ideologically outsiders view the world in a completely different light than they do. I saw many cases where *reaffirming value statements*, off-handed remarks used to legitimize and reinforce biases by de-valuing those in opposition, were used to highlight ideological differences between themselves and those resistant to couchsurfing. This was occasionally observed in a small portion of the interviewees when they brought up related ideological beliefs, such as politics, to contrast themselves from those against couchsurfing.

Numerous sources from all over the United States mentioned how they found people from the North are more open-minded to couchsurfing than the traditional conservative found in Texas. For example, out of the nineteen people I interviewed, only two identified as being either moderate or conservative, with everyone else considering themselves liberal. Even though both conservatives were born and raised in Texas, I discovered that 75% of the native Texans I interviewed were liberal. This is a noteworthy finding considering that Frank Newport (2013) reported that a Gallup poll, conducted from January to December of 2012, found only 19.4% of Texans identify as liberal, while moderates (34.4%) and conservatives (42.6%) were significantly more common in this area. While a person's politics may not always be very important or define them, political views are still an attitude which can shape or reflect a person's worldview. Given the scope of this project, it is unreasonable to assume that people who reject couchsurfing hold some form of conservative attitudes. However the average person living in Texas is statistically more likely conservative, and within couchsurfing at least, these people are looked at as outsiders. This ultimately leaves couchsurfers in a unique position in Texas, one where their identity and beliefs may push them into a subculture like couchsurfing in order to discover those similar to themselves.

Understanding the differences between those who do choose to become couchsurfers versus those who don't should help illuminate how important barriers are in taking the steps to sign up in the first place. There is a thin line between being Resistant, Apprehensive, or Inclined. The only true differences among these groups are the number of pressures and problems that they perceive couchsurfing to have for themselves. If the barriers are as powerful as they seem, it is important to consider how and why CouchSurfing.org and the couchsurfing interactions themselves have been able to alleviate these issues, or whether or not these issues were not a problem for those attempting to become couchsurfers in the first place. In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss a few key issues in more detail as well as other similar barrier-related themes that emerged throughout the data collection process.

4.3 Barriers in Action: Danger, Safety, & Risk

I still vividly remember the first time I heard about couchsurfing several years ago. One night while randomly surfing the Internet I stumbled upon an article about it. In the article, the author discussed how couchsurfing was a new way to travel that involved complete strangers opening up their homes and letting people stay a few days with them for free. I didn't even know such a thing existed. It was an interesting concept, but I wasn't sure if it was "my kind of thing". I was intrigued but felt like I needed to know more, so I decided to check out the website. When I accessed CouchSurfing.org, I quickly found out that they had just recently reached the one million users milestone. This changed my demeanor from being intrigued to pure astonishment. In my mind there was no way a million people would be willing to do such a thing. I thought it was a pretty cool idea but could barely see myself doing it, let alone the average person or anyone else I could think of. It just seemed a bit too dangerous and out there to me. Still I couldn't deny there was something enticing about the whole idea, but I had many doubts in my mind at the time. What if the other person was some kind of crazy weirdo? An axe murderer!? But then again, perhaps I was wrong. Maybe this was something common and mundane. I

rarely traveled, so pure ignorance on this matter was a possibility. I looked across the room at my brother and asked if he'd ever heard about this whole "couchsurfing" phenomenon. He shook his head, negative, so I explained it to him and waited for his reaction. The first thing that came out of his mouth was the first thing that many people say when they first hear about couchsurfing: he asked, "Is that even safe?" Exactly, that was the question.

While I cannot deny my own initial impressions influenced this research, the main result was that I decided to study this phenomenon to try to answer some of the questions raised. For example, the question of safety within couchsurfing remained present throughout this study. Not so much in quantitative form (e.g., how often are couchsurfers a victim of theft or assault?) but also in question-*ing* how perceived personal safety impacts personal practice and engagement within couchsurfing. Considering that this project was also my own journey into a new world of couchsurfing, I wondered how, and if, I would be able to overcome my own hesitations and safety concerns to be able to become a couchsurfer.

As I journeyed deeper into the couchsurfing website, looking at profiles, reading about the reference system, verification, and so on, I began to realize that there was a well thought out system of checks and balances in place that could help establish a feeling of safety. The safety mechanisms found on CouchSurfing.org have been designed to do the best job possible to minimize risks of danger even though it is impossible to completely ensure safety in one's day-to-day life, let alone with something along the lines of couchsurfing. No matter how rarely problems may actually occur with couchsurfing, or what additional mechanisms are placed on CouchSurfing.org to further attempt to stop these events, danger and risk will always exist. Thus, safety remains a potential concern for anyone involved with couchsurfing.

CouchSurfing.org's Influence on Barriers

Most of the people I interviewed discovered couchsurfing through an outside third-party source such as reading about it in an article in a magazine or mentioned on a website, but the

next thing they did when they learned about couchsurfing was to go directly to the couchsurfing website seeking to learn more about it. This initial visit is pivotal in forming first impressions about couchsurfing. All it takes is a few moments to form an opinion about the website and its users; even the smallest detail can sway someone in one direction or another.

Everyone in my sample told me that 'they just signed up' like it was no big deal. Actually, it is as easy as clicking a few buttons — because that's literally all you do. But as I spoke more in-depth with them about the "steps they took to become a couchsurfer" (Questions #8 — Appendix C) and asked questions about them joining the site and creating their profile (section "The Website" in the questionnaire), I found that only a few actually read as much as possible about the site prior to joining, while everyone else either briefly looked it over or just 'jumped right in'. Nonetheless, everyone had to go to the site to become a couchsurfing member in the first place. Every person who has ever logged into CouchSurfing.org has been influenced by the site itself, either directly through reading through its "mission statement" page and other informational materials, or indirectly through the formatting and design of the website. Therefore it is important to consider how the CouchSurfing.org website frames the barrier issues of danger, safety, trust, and how that may influence its viewers.

CouchSurfing.org addresses these barriers by presenting them front and center, mentioning "Trust & Safety" issues directly on the front-page while even posing the question, "Is this safe?" (CouchSurfing.org 2012e). Interestingly, CouchSurfing.org doesn't attempt to present couchsurfing as completely safe and secure, but instead leaves these issues to the individual by warning that "safety isn't one-size-fits-all" and that the website has only "developed tools so you can make the best choices for *you*" (CouchSurfing.org 2012e). By placing emphasis on the user's own personal choice, the website is leaving these issues open for interpretation by every person who visits the site. They must personally determine the significance "safety" issues have for themselves and evaluate how much risk and danger they see posed by the act of couchsurfing. It is only through personally interpreting couchsurfing as

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risky and/or dangerous that issues of trust and safety become actualized into barriers, which if not overcome would drastically reduce the likelihood of a person's participating.

According to the CouchSurfing.org website:

We maintain a policy of neutrality when resolving disputes.
It is our role to support you, not to judge you. Cultural perspectives, personal opinion, and individual perception can all be at play when two members disagree. Our team maintains a neutral stance in order to deal with both parties fairly. We will take sides *only in the case of a documented crime, a breach of our Terms of Use, or a violation of our safety policies.* — CouchSurfing.org (http://www.couchsurfing.org/safety/) - Italics mine.

By CouchSurfing.org presenting itself merely as a site that has created 'safety features' that act as tools to be used in whatever manner the user wishes, they have taken a position where they appear to remain neutral by not interfering directly with its users' personal choices to participate and decisions about with whom to surf or host. While the site administrators may be more or less silent when it comes to the apparent danger and safety issues associated with couchsurfing, they still influence their users on this subject by deciding to bring it up on the front page of the website. While their position may be one of indirectness, they emphasize the importance of the safety features to a degree that potential couchsurfers could become alienated from the idea since it makes it appear as though couchsurfing is unsafe and dangerous.

Interestingly, during this thesis project the couchsurfing website took nearly all mentions of trust and safety issues off its front page, leaving only one small green link entitled "Safety" at the footer of the main page. They still kept the original safety information intact and accessible but relegated it to a deeper part of the site which would be harder for non-members to discover (Safety section, FAQ, etc.). This change occurred during their major site re-design in the summer of 2012, which began a short time after CouchSurfing.org had incorporated into a B-company and started receiving financial investments. The push to modernize the site by adding new functionality (such as forcing users to add more detail into their couch requests by requiring a certain word count before being able to send a request), limiting access for non-

members (you can no longer browse any profiles without signing up), focusing on aesthetics, and making it easier to navigate may have been as a means to attract more people into signing up for the site. By minimizing the presence of references to safety issues, and anything else that could be considered remotely negative, CouchSurfing.org reduced the impact of initial entry barriers.

For example, someone who fell into the "apprehensive" category of potential couchsurfers would most likely already be fairly apprehensive over the legitimacy of couchsurfing. Having this doubt, it is understandable that he or she might be thorough in reading everything on the site as an attempt to address any hesitation or negative feelings present at the outset. Originally presenting the "Trust & Safety" information front and center, whether intentional or not, could have acted as an exclusionary mechanism resulting in self-selection, leaving only those who were not as fearful of the potential risks and dangers to be found within couchsurfing. The recent redesign of the website reduced the entry-barrier in several ways. Now the site is more accessible for new users in general (lowering the physical barrier) at the same time minimizing personal barriers by not focusing their attention on issues of danger and safety. Since all the individuals I interviewed for this study signed up well before this change in the website occurred, it is important to realize that my current findings may not apply equally to those who joined couchsurfing at a later date.

Couchsurfers on the Danger & Safety Problem

As I interviewed more and more couchsurfers, I began to realize that these safety issues were never really considered a major problem for many of them — if at all. Couchsurfing is something that they felt has been deemed *dangerous*, *un-safe,* and even *abnormal* by the standards of other people within American society. Unlike the "Resistant" outsiders discussed earlier, couchsurfers tended to either downplay the safety issues or reject that they were even problematic for them at all.

Yeah. I don't think it's really that much of an issue for me. [pause] I mean that doesn't mean I'm not going to read peoples profiles before I let them stay with me or try to surf with them. But I don't immediately... Danger is not the first thing that comes to mind whenever I think of interacting with a new person on couchsurfing. — Amber

Couchsurfers tend to push aside the criticisms that couchsurfing is dangerous or unsafe, stating that couchsurfing only *appears* to be that way at first sight. They believe this to be due to two common factors: [1] Not understanding how CouchSurfing.org functions, [2] Perceptions about risks and danger.

First of all, couchsurfers complain that the average person fails to understand the basic premise of what couchsurfing is even about and note that CouchSurfing.org's purpose is to make it as safe as possible. They do this by arguing that couchsurfing isn't completely about traveling or finding cheap accommodations, but meeting new and interesting people and getting to see a more authentic and intimate view of their city. They also bring up specific aspects about how CouchSurfing.org has been designed to help protect against these dangers (such as the reference system and the identity verification process). They believe once people have a firm grasp on how these aspects of the couchsurfing website functions, and how much effort and time must be invested to gain positive references and to fully fill out a profile, it is much easier to see how difficult it would be to use the site for deceptive purposes.

In addition, couchsurfers tended to express their own concerns about how they feel like the average person is misinformed and tends to overstate the dangers and risks in their life.

There is always risk in everything you do. It's just a calculated risk that people are willing to take as with anything, driving a car, hopping onto a plane. Hopping onto a plane, you are less likely to die in a plane crash than you are to be sucked into a tornado or even win the lottery for that matter. . . — Garrett

This *risk-oriented view* of the world was shared by the majority of the couchsurfers I had interviewed. I believe this view may have been used as a way help *rationalize* the risk away from the more dangerous aspects of couchsurfing. The same could be said about the trend of bringing up other, and in most cases more extreme, dangerous activities (like hitchhiking or skydiving) as a reference point to make couchsurfing seem more acceptable and safer.

Why don't you think the danger issues are a problem for you?
I just, I just don't live my life that way. I mean, yeah, I am aware of dangers. Dangers are out there, but I just don't see this as dangerous. . . I have hitchhiked from Fort Worth to Ann Arbor in my 30s- all the way to Michigan in my 30s. So hell, this is nothing compared to that.

So you are saying hitchhiking is more dangerous?
Oh hell yeah. Even back then it was more dangerous than this. I don't see anything dangerous about this. . . just don't, I think it has a good what do you call them? checks and balances? or whatever you want to call it.

Yeah, the reference system?
Yeah, yeah. It's got a good reference system — Dan

As we can see from the example above, Dan brings up his hitchhiking experience as a way to 'shift' the conversation to legitimize the safety of couchsurfing by framing hitchhiking as significantly more dangerous. By the fifth interview, three out of the five informants had brought up hitchhiking in this way. Most agreed that couchsurfing is nowhere as dangerous as hitchhiking. Although a little less than half of the respondents had some hitchhiking experience or intended to do it eventually (either by hitching or just picking up a stranger off the side of the road), everyone else rejected this idea claiming it was something they were just too uncomfortable to do.

This difference in opinion is interesting given how similar couchsurfing and hitchhiking are, both are involved with traveling and deal strictly with being stuck with a stranger in a very personal space (car or home). An argument could be made about the difference of *necessity* between the two, especially considering that hitchhiking is commonly used as a last resort for people who lack transportation. While this was true for a few of the couchsurfers I spoke to, some still chose to hitchhike when other options were still available — opting for the more interesting and exciting experience. Although much disagreement can be found about the perception of how "dangerous" hitchhiking and couchsurfing are, couchsurfers across the board agree that couchsurfing is safer than the dangers found in hitchhiking.

Additionally, even if couchsurfing was confirmed to be statistically more or less safer than hitchhiking or any other alternative form of travel or tourism, it would still be considered

more dangerous than what you would find if you decided to travel and find accommodations through more traditional methods. This leaves all couchsurfers, no matter where they stand on the hitchhiking divide, open to accepting a greater amount of danger and risk than traditional travelers.

Many times when I brought up or asked questions regarding couchsurfing being dangerous or unsafe, the interviewee would focus on how people outside of couchsurfing commonly held those views, but not always themselves. They not only reported people in general reacting negatively ("that sounds scary/dangerous"), but some even felt this from their own family members. It was not uncommon for couchsurfers to exclude their status as a couchsurfer from certain family members, such as one of their parents, fearing some kind of backlash or conflict. Many brought up how they knew some family members or friends would tell them not to do it (again, typically related to safety issues), but admitted that their friends and family's concerns were not enough to change their mind. It was as though these concerns were expected beforehand, illustrating that couchsurfers understand how others may negatively react to their participation within this community.

> I don't know that I really mentioned it [to my family]. I think I told my ex-husband that I was just staying with friends because I thought he would, I thought people would think it was really strange and tell me not to. And maybe that was kind of naive and stupid not to say that but that's kind of what I did. Nowadays I'm just like, "oh, I'm couchsurfing!" and my mom is like, "what's that?" and I tell her and she is like, "oh", and then she just moves on because she is like, "you travel so much that if your judgment says this is okay, it probably is" because I've got all that travel experience. - Harriet

Harriet's attempts to hide and shield certain members of her family from her couchsurfing status shows that not only she recognized the potential danger issues, but also how her participation could potentially threaten people's perceptions of her. While only a small proportion of couchsurfers did this, all mentioned in one way or another that they knew outsiders viewed couchsurfing as dangerous or problematic in some ways. Their attempt to cover up such knowledge indicates that they can imagine how couchsurfing might be considered "risky" or even "problematic". This goes against Petterson and Siek's (2009) findings

that many of their respondents didn't realize the risks and dangers involved with disclosing personal information on the Internet at all.

However, I did find instances that support Petterson and Siek's view that couchsurfers typically believed that nobody would ever take advantage of them in such a way when they were asked about these issues (2009:261). When it came to their safety and the idea of being victimized or hurt, they almost always took the position of giving the person the "benefit of the doubt". This sometimes even extended further into almost a self-fulfilling behavior logic where if mutual trust was not expressed and given, it would create an environment where conflict and misunderstandings could breed.

> I find if you expect people to behave properly they generally do. If you are *suspicious*, and you-know? lock everything away... then people are more likely to behave in the way you expect. So I don't expect people to behave negatively and so I didn't really have any negative ideas about it- <u>I'm not... blind to the *dangers* that may possible exist. But... you-know? I haven't had any bad experiences</u>, you-know? — Betty

There is a lot of emphasis placed on personal experiences in couchsurfing. As Betty describes above, the knowledge that she could be taken advantage of or victimized means very little to her when she, and the couchsurfers around her, have not been personally placed into a situation like that. This same logic can be seen when someone who is new and apprehensive about couchsurfing would show up to a local event and start talking to the more experienced couchsurfers around them. Anytime the newbie expressed any doubts or safety became the topic of discussion, I would hear the other couchsurfers tell them they just need to "put themselves out there" and then you will have a great time and figure out there is nothing to worry about. In this way, personal experiences are not only important in how people react to couchsurfing initially (past experiences with activities similar to couchsurfing) but also may serve as a way to break down barriers through exposure to couchsurfing in general.

Overcoming Danger Through "Sharing Experience"

Couchsurfers are not immune to the same fear and discomfort that limit so many people from engaging in couchsurfing; these feelings are grounded in the very foundation of our social life and cannot be escaped. With these ideas in place, it seems very few people can actually just jump into couchsurfing. They need something additional in place to counterbalance these concerns, and couchsurfing offers various mechanisms to accomplish this.

Not everyone was able to just jump right into couchsurfing. Some expressed that they needed help to overcome their fears and doubts about couchsurfing. They described certain situations that made it easier to do this. One of the most common was pairing up with a friend or partner to avoid having to surf or host alone. This was more prevalent for the women I talked to, but also discussed by one of the men.

> **Do you think you would probably be interested in it [couchsurfing] if he [the roommate] wasn't there?**
>
> It definitely made the transition easier. We talked, well I guess we didn't talk about on the record, but like, yeah, there is that a kind of idea of you know, 'is this guy going to murder me?' and that sort of thing. And it's easier to take that transition with somebody that's already done it before. Um, same thing when we couchsurf with somebody. It's easier to go meet some random guy and stay at his house when you got your buddy next to you. And same thing when you're hosting people too. There is somebody else there and, adds to the comfort factor. But I think, I like the idea of couchsurfing, I think I would have done it. [pauses] Just been more of an uncomfortable transition into it.
> — Ethan

Here Ethan mentions how it wasn't only the presence of his friend that made him more comfortable, but that his friend was also an experienced couchsurfer who had done this numerous times before. His friend had gone through the process of couchsurfing and survived, allowing him to share his own experiences with Ethan and help answer any questions or alleviate any concerns he might have had. Even though most people tend to host or surf alone, this 'sharing of experience' is a very common trend amongst the couchsurfing community.

Many people who are new to couchsurfing not only have to take into account the normal issues involved while traveling alone, but also deal with the added complications of

trying out couchsurfing for the first time. This leaves couchsurfing newbies having to find alternative ways to overcome potential problems. The local couchsurfing events are the most common way for this to occur.

While the online and offline couchsurfing communities were founded basically as a way for couchsurfers to meet with one another and share travel stories, they have become a great source of information that people can use to help alleviate any hesitations or concerns someone might have. By going to a local couchsurfing event or gathering, people are able to hear stories that reinforce the legitimacy of the couchsurfing experience. This gaining of second-hand experience is essential for overcoming barriers. It's easier to relate to personal stories, and having a connection and knowing what kind of situations you and your host or surfer will be involved in. The members who had the most experience couchsurfing[4] often organized and took the 'hosting' responsibilities of these local events, which included helping those new to couchsurfing introduce themselves to the rest of the couchsurfers. This "couchsurfing advocator" role wasn't always tied to a specific person, but could encompass anyone who those new to couchsurfing would begin to talk to (at least if they weren't a newbie as well). This involved handing out advice, giving tips on how to use the site, and most importantly: telling our story.

I even ended up in this "couchsurfing advocator" role myself a few times unintentionally. Once at a potluck, one of these new people approached me and then started with the typical questions a new person asks: "How long have you been couchsurfing? Where have you gone?" Before I knew it a conversation had developed and I was explaining all kinds of different aspects to her: how the CouchSurfing.org website worked, the importance of the reference system, advice on how to write a good couch request, et cetera. What I found so interesting about the experience was that I still felt like a newbie myself since I had only surfed two times at that

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[4] Couchsurfing experience wasn't necessarily tied to the number of times these people hosted or surfed, but the length of time they had been in the community. Most of the local event organizers I met actually didn't host or surf that often, if at all, and preferred to stick to these local events. But all had been within this community for almost a year or more.

point, yet for her my advice was well established. This made me realize that a big part of these events were not only the chance to meet new and interesting people, but the ability to sharing of experience and help others be able to get a firm grasp on how couchsurfing works and learn if this community was really for them.

Can Couchsurfing Increase Safety?

While safety and couchsurfing tend to be viewed as fairly incompatible by outsiders, surprisingly, couchsurfers tend to believe couchsurfing actually adds to their safety while traveling. Couchsurfers often prefer to engage in alternative forms of tourism, which are considered unsafe compared to more traditional mass tourism. On top of that, couchsurfers tend to travel alone, in countries where they have never been before and don't always know the language or have a firm grasp on the cultural norms and expectations of the place they are visiting. They are placed in a very vulnerable situation where they could easily get lost, have trouble communicating with the locals, or even be taken advantage of and victimized. Therefore, many participants view couchsurfing as a way to overcome or help minimize problems they would normally face while traveling. Garrett explains how he sees this below:

> Once I did it and explained to them that not only is it a cheap way to travel, make friends but it is also a local connection in a city you are not familiar with at all. And so it's really a safety thing too. I feel more safe surfing with somebody than I do just at a hotel by myself. Just because you know the person there, if you don't speak the language, they obviously do cause they live there or they're just a shitty resident. They know the ends and outs of the culture, they know the local customs. They know where to go or where not to go. They can help out in so far as translating in certain situations if you happened to say the wrong thing or look at someone the wrong way or vice versa. And just the tiny differences that can erupt into world war can be squashed instantly. So it's really a safety thing too... — Garrett

Couchsurfing can help with such problems and may be safer than backpacking and staying in hostels in some ways. But these benefits that couchsurfing brings to traveling still do not allay the concerns of the general population. This is because ordinary tourism today has been built on a foundation of *mass tourism* (Marson 2011). As tourism became a much more

significant part of our society, its economic power and influence started to transform many countries, cultures, and places into 'tourist attractions and locations'. These developments have increased accessibility to the average person by creating a tourism infrastructure designed to bring ease and comforts to the tourist. No aspect of tourism has been untouched by this. Facilities like tourist hotels have been built throughout the world for the sole purpose of accommodating travelers by attempting to provide some of the creature-comforts they find at home; a personal private space with its own TV, air conditioning, shower, kitchen, and laundry services. Even the larger communities/areas that these tourists decide to visit have been systematically structured to function as a tourist destination, with the possibility of things such as increased policing and security measures to help relieve many of perceived dangers of being in a 'foreign' and 'unknown' place. Due to these circumstances, the traditional tourist appears to be at much less risk of danger than a couchsurfer, who wants to travel and experience places outside the bounds of mass tourism.

Safety issues are not solely related to the type of tourism a person engages in but are tied directly to interactions with people unknown to us, people whose roles we are uncertain about, who have no stable relation to ourselves in any way. We have nothing to go by except initial reactions (e.g., gut feeling or stereotypes); few expectations, and uncertain cultural norms. Couchsurfing is able to counter the strangeness of the stranger through establishing a framework of expectations, norms, and sense of security. Having a person *similar* to yourself in such a *different* place can help alleviate many barriers. Even something as small as being able to speak in your native language with your host, can help create a sense of familiarity in such a unknown world. Therefore couchsurfing can, at least to a certain kind of traveler, create a sense of security from such a seemingly dangerous activity.

Risking the Danger?

Since some of the previous literature has framed couchsurfing as a *risk-taking activity* (Petterson and Siek 2009; Teng et al. 2010; Zhu 2010), it is important to determine how couchsurfers themselves interpret risks associated with overcoming the problems of *basic security* and *trust* encountered via couchsurfing. Risk has been most commonly defined as a type of "hazard, loss, damage, or threat" or even "an indication of unwanted events" (Zinn 2008:6). There is no doubt that most people would agree that there is at least some potential risk present when couchsurfing. But "[w]hen it comes to sociological approaches [on risk], the perspective changes from objective risks and subjective biases to socioculturally mediated or constructed risks." This leaves a couchsurfers' interpretation of the risk involved not only mediated by the social group's institutional organization (CouchSurfing.org), but also socially constructed by each actor involved in a CS interaction (typically host and surfer) and the community as a whole (Zinn 2008:6). Since CouchSurfing.org doesn't directly raise this issue of risk on the website, I will limit this question to how risk is understood at the individual level. By asking participants candidly about their own perceptions and beliefs concerning risk and risk-taking, we should be able to determine if, and how much, risk-taking is a factor in overcoming the barriers discussed previously.

Couchsurfing might even be *attractive* to individuals who perceive couchsurfing to be a risky endeavor if they embrace a risk-taking personal identity or simply view the risks as a necessary part of the couchsurfing experience. Although most people I spoke to didn't consider themselves to be much of a risk-taker, a few showed signs of this kind of behavior. Considering that there are many outdoorsy and adventurous types of people in couchsurfing, it is not uncommon to see activities such as rock climbing, skydiving, rafting, and even the occasional extreme sport listed in the "interests" section of someone's online profile. Although such activities could be considered fairly dangerous and risky, very few of these people explicitly detailed their risk-taking attitude on their profile, unlike Garrett, a late 20s male, who wrote that

he enjoys, "Doing things that have a high percentage of killing me. Cheating death." It is important to realize the purpose of an online profile in order to understand the significance behind saying such a thing. By listing activities associated with adrenaline, danger and risk, perhaps all of these individuals are attempting to present themselves in a manner similar to Garrett's inclination for risk-taking, just in a much more subtle way. Although he dismissed the presence of risks in couchsurfing, it acted as a motivating factor for his own involvement. He still brought up how the 'allure' of risk, the taboo nature of doing dangerous and risky things, is a part of couchsurfing and could see how that would influence others to become involved with it.

The majority of people who brought up their predilection for risk did not so much because they define themselves as a risk-taker, but because someone else had in the past. When I started asking about how couchsurfers' families reacted to their decision to start couchsurfing, a few revealed that their parents believe that they have taken too much risk in the past.

> They have reasons to be worried and uh... I know that in some ways I can be reckless, I guess? Well, I don't feel like I am, but I can see why they can think that. They just haven't done things like this themselves, so it scares them a little bit. But uh, I just reassure them and it doesn't make me feel... less positive or less trusting about it myself. - Catherine

When it comes to conceptualizing risk and danger, couchsurfers and non-couchsurfers almost always seem to disagree. Above, we can see how Catherine and her family fall into this same sort of disagreement. Catherine doesn't view couchsurfing as dangerous, but still is able to see how her family could take it that way. She can understand their side of the story, yet her family has a more difficult time understanding hers. While parents tended to be concerned for their couchsurfing son or daughter, most accepted this behavior as typical to their personality. But just like all the couchsurfers I spoke to, Catherine doesn't let this 'outsider perspective' influence her own judgments regarding risks or dangers involved in couchsurfing. In a way, the couchsurfer must be able to dismiss such accusations in order to be able to couchsurf in the

first place. Without doing so, couchsurfers would be overwhelmed by all the same things that stop people like their parents from engaging in couchsurfing.

4.4 Gender Barriers

In the previous section I explored many concepts and problems that together illustrate the complications involved in the subjective nature of participation within couchsurfing. Looking back, there was a major aspect to this which I have so far not discussed in detail — gender. A person's gender could be considered one of the most powerful influences on how a person interacts with other couchsurfers, and how beliefs can operate as barriers that impede involvement in couchsurfing. It is important to recognize that gender in couchsurfing is not exclusively a female driven issue. But when it comes to examining issues like safety and danger, society places a greater amount of pressure on women which can intensify these issues.

Even though there has been virtually no research dedicated to the gendered aspects of couchsurfing, I was still surprised to find only a few studies that mentioned sex or gender in any way: Tan (2010); Teng et al. (2010); and Zhu (2010). All three of these studies discussed how gender impacts trust, and all that can hinder it (issues of safety and security discussed earlier) within the couchsurfing community. Some of their findings appear to be contradictory. For example, Teng et al. discovered that "on average women are perceived to be more trustworthy than men" (2010:6) while Zhu (2010) found no significant differences. Further, these studies appear to view gender as nothing more than a statistical variable, with one going so far as to conclude that "after eliminating *the most obvious fear factor*, female Couchsurfers do not differ with their male counterparts" in their views on trust (Tan 2010:376, emphasis added). Tan rests this conclusion on his evidence that "female Couchsurfers are more likely to think about personal safety" because they are "more vulnerable to attacks, especially of a sexual nature" (2010:375). By stating that female couchsurfers' lack of trust is "obviously" associated with the

fear of being victimized with rape and assault, Tan is implying that these threats of violence (perceived or otherwise) can be safely assumed to be present in the couchsurfing community. Given that similar studies on trust found no significant differences between female and male couchsurfers' views on trust (Zhu 2010), let alone any additional evidence to support the assertion that fear of victimization and violence perpetuates such differences, more attention needs to be placed on problems such as fear of victimization to better understand the gendered issues, if any, which may arise in couchsurfing.

Being Female: Gender as a Barrier

From my previous discussion about of the apparent dangers and risk involved with participating in couchsurfing, I am inclined to believe that many of these issues are "gendered" in some way and should therefore be viewed with gender in mind. Danger and risk has been traditionally associated with masculinity and manhood, where it is commonplace to see males seek out adventures and engage in risk-taking behaviors. This differs for females, who have been traditionally placed into a position by Western society to be viewed as, and view themselves as, more vulnerable and prone to victimization. The accepted belief that women must be more wary of the dangers, many of which are considered to effect primarily women (thus are gendered themselves: e.g. sexual assault and rape), could lead women to engage less in risk-taking behaviors. This raises many questions about female couchsurfers and their participation in couchsurfing, especially as related to perceived and actual risks entailed.

Though CouchSurfing.org makes no particular reference to any of the potential dangers of couchsurfing[5], let alone gender specific ones, the website does allow for its users to list on their online profile a "Preferred Gender," which expresses who they are willing to host/surf with if they so choose. A person, no matter their gender, is able to select a preferred gender of "Male only," "Female only," or "Any." Selecting a preferred gender in no way limits

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[5] CouchSurfing.org's "Safety" webpage only discusses what steps to take when faced with a situation of "immediate risk". Call 911, leave the premises immediately, etc. (CouchSurfing.org 2012)

who can view your profile or send CouchRequests to you, but enables other couchsurfers to know if the host or surfer may automatically reject their CouchRequest up-front based solely on their biological sex.

I found less than 10% of people in the Dallas/Fort Worth area limited their couchsurfing interactions to a single sex on their CouchSurfing.org profile. Yet, 100% of these were women who limited their preference to other women. This fact represents just how disproportionally women are affected by gender issues. Even this statistic is minimizes the gender effect. During my interviews I found a few cases where women had put that they had 'no preference' on gender, yet would still actively avoid surfing with people of the opposite sex. Therefore there could potentially be a much larger number of women who are affected by this than it appears at first. Also, this 'preference' issue is not acted on in a completely all or nothing either. For many female couchsurfers the importance of gender was situational, depending on whether or not they would be surfing/hosting with a companion. Some people felt perfectly comfortable couchsurfing with the other sex as long as they were not alone (either male or female), while others felt only comfortable if they had a male with them (such as their boyfriend or brother).

Although more rare, I have heard secondhand accounts of men who preferred single sex accommodations as well. This is most commonly attributed to cultural norms and beliefs rather than personal choice or barriers related to safety concerns — such as Muslim men's inability to host women due to cultural and religious reasons. None of the men I interviewed, or met in general, expressed any kind of preference regarding gender. Nevertheless, when looking at some of these same men's profiles I found a small number of cases where they had references left primarily by female users, suggesting that men also fit into this 'hidden figure' of gender preference, but I doubt these men's preferences are due to the same reasons as the women - if anything, most likely the opposite is true.

Outside of the administration of CouchSurfing.org, many women (and a few men) have come together to create and join online couchsurfing groups dedicated to gender issues,

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allowing a place where related problems can be discussed openly with one another. One of the most popular of these types of groups is the "Independent Women" group, which currently has over 2,250 members[6]. This group was created for independent women, "not only one who chooses to travel alone but also chooses to live like an independent individual," where "[d]iscussions are central to travel tips, *safety concerns*, *myths about traveling alone*, resource sharing, brainstorming, . . .". It is striking that two of the top five issues this group addresses relate specifically to the issues of danger, trust, and safety. These issues appear highly important to at least one segment of the female population of couchsurfers.

Not every problem that men and women run into during their time couchsurfing involves physical danger or risk; there are also many social and relationship issues that can arise during a couchsurfing interaction, especially if it involves two people of the opposite sex. I noticed that a few women wrote explicitly on their public profiles that they will not host or surf with anyone who is interested in a romantic relationship, emphasizing that couchsurfing is not a "dating site". Given that couchsurfing was founded on the principle of intercultural interaction, it would not be surprising to find many men and women who have not understood a basic cultural custom or sign from the host or surfer's home culture (like cheek kissing or close personal space norms) and have accidently misinterpreted it as a romantic one. Also, since some couchsurfing interactions have been viewed as highly intimate and emotional (Bialski 2008), there is always the chance for situations in which gendered issues between men and women could arise. Therefore I believe that it is important to consider how people deal with gender and set the boundaries of relationships in negotiating couchsurfing encounters.

When I sent out a message asking longtime couchsurfers why they had not couchsurfed since signing up (the Dreamers discussed previously), I found that half of the respondents said they just didn't have to opportunity to surf yet (due to life constraints like work or leaving the site during those 'inactive' years) while the other half brought up the potential

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[6] Independent Women group — http://www.couchsurfing.org/group.html?gid=892

dangers of couchsurfing and other barrier issues. Interestingly enough, these two explanations were separated completely by gender. Men gave logistical reasons why they couldn't couchsurf, women brought up heightened safety concerns. Although it is possible that social norms associated with masculinity and femininity may have led both genders to emphasize only one aspect of the truth in their answers, the men did stay away from the more emotional explanations of their lack of participation (fear, danger, etc.) and women did not focus on the external issues which might have limited their ability to do so.

These different explanations illustrate that gender is a substantial part in a person's interpretation and understandings of the potential issues posed by couchsurfing, and the possibility that their experiences within it are gendered as well. If this is the case, then *male privilege* exists within couchsurfing. Men not only are able to overlook gender as a issue or problem in the first place, but they largely bypass the pressures that make gender a barrier to participation as well. Although there is a near equal gender balance on CouchSurfing.org, with 53% of users being male and 47% female (CouchSurfing.org 2013a), this statistic looks at everyone who has ever registered for the website and isn't taking into consideration actual participation. Perhaps the motivations of people who sign up are not gendered, but the reasons for not being able to go through with it may very well be.

4.5 Privacy

Within the last few decades the Internet and other technologies have greatly increased our ability to easily connect and exchange information with others, with the single click of a button. When the Internet first came into existence it was created as a mechanism for information exchange. But as computers became much more common in the household the Internet shifted from being a mere information based academic and business tool to something that encompasses every part of our social life. From the printing press to the car, we have seen how new technologies can uproot our lives and change the basic course of history — the

Internet is no different. Just as there have been great social and economic implications from technologies, people have always had to adapt to the changes coming from these developments in order to function and survive.

Now that computer technologies are so easily accessible and play such a prominent part in our daily lives, our lives have also become an essential part of the exchanges and interactions occurring through these technologies. Not only can we access information like the "facts and figures" found on the webpages of Wikipedia we openly share personal and intimate details about our lives which can be found on *our own* social networking profiles. Recently we have witnessed "a growing number of acts of self-disclosure and self-exposure, of publicizing private matters . . . more and more people, it is said, are eager to reveal intimate details of their private lives in public, to expose themselves in an indecent, shameless manner. As a consequence, there seems to be a dissolution of the boundaries between the private and the public spheres . . ." (Burkart 2010:23). This has been amplified with the rise of new media: the Internet, new forms of television, the popularity of social networking sites, and mobile phone usage in public places. We have reached a point where *privacy* has become a more crucial problem for our society to understand than previously. While some of this backlash is against companies and institutions using our online personal data with limited or no permission to do so, others question the social and psychological ramifications that can arise from a world filled with rampant self-disclosure and *oversharing* (Agger 2012).

Although privacy may be a very salient issue in our lives today, this has not always been true. Historical evidence has shown that the modern view of privacy didn't come into existence until the eighteenth century, when the emerging bourgeois society marked the separation between the private and the public spheres through the demarcation of work and family. When writing about this time period, Gunter Burkart (2010) emphasized the important link between privacy and the home: "A new sphere of intimacy within the house emerged. The house became a shelter of family safety, a place offering security *(Geborgenheit)*, and later a

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'haven in a heart-less world' (Lasch, 1979)" (2010:25). At this point a person's home became a symbolic representation of his or her privacy. This interconnection between the home and privacy is central to understanding how couchsurfers approach and solve problems of privacy, especially considering that the home is the fundamental place where the act of couchsurfing occurs. Because of couchsurfing's inherent ideal of openness versus privacy, we need to determine if *privacy* is ever a barrier for participants? Or is this something that only effects those outside of couchsurfing?

Are Couchsurfers Private People?

I expected nearly everyone to leave their online profiles unlocked and open for anyone to see because privacy would not really be expected within couchsurfing. But when examining the Fort Worth population, I found that around 22.8% had a hidden 'private profile' that only other users who have signed up on the site can see. This is not a default setting on the CouchSurfing.org website, meaning that these individuals had to purposely choose to hide their profile by going into their profile's privacy settings and checking off the option to do so. I couldn't find any connections between gender, age, or role preference (surfs only, hosts only, or both) and restricting profile access, but roughly 32% of those who did had no references listed on their profiles, so experience may be an important determining factor for this. It is unknown how much this has to do with their general stance on privacy as a personal preference.

A similar trend can be seen for people who do not disclose their legal name on their profile and opt for using an Internet username as a pseudonym. Although this represents a significantly smaller portion of local online profiles, roughly 5%, this could potentially have a detrimental effect on the chances of being able to couchsurf because of how important names are to couchsurfing. I only met one person who used a pseudonym. He told me that he only used one because he wasn't even sure if he was going to use the site when he first signed up — he was interested but *apprehensive*. But after he become a fairly active member in the local

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community, going to events, parties, etc., he had little trouble finding surfers since he already had numerous references (that used his actual name) on his profile.

Locked profiles and use of pseudonyms are uncommon but indicate that at least a small portion of couchsurfers have some form of privacy concerns related to their identity being accessible online at least. If privacy concerns play a part for those who are "apprehensive," this may also be a barrier for nonparticipants (the "resistant).

4.6 Barriers of Trust

Recognition of the apparent dangers and possible problems posed by couchsurfing could be a byproduct of how these individuals view "trust." Tan (2010) argues that "trust is so intrinsic in the system that in some cases the Couchsurfers don't think about it," as when one surfer told him, "'I don't really worry about security or the safety, because it seems like, so natural that, the person is trustworthy somehow. I haven't thought about it. I don't worry about it, I guess'" (Tan 2010:375). These findings could reinforce the idea that couchsurfers are a naturally trustworthy type of person unlikely to pose a danger to oneself or others — Sztompka's (1999) "trusting impulse." Other research has shown that trust may be less dependent on an individual's personality and more on how individuals interpret the community's reliance on trust in order to function since some basic form of trust must be established for individuals to join the community (overcoming the initial 'trust barrier'). This point can be illustrated by Zhu's (2010) discovery that even though there is a high degree of social trust *within* the Couchsurfing community, "the respondents seem to believe that CouchSurfers are more trustworthy than the general public, although the degree of trust for the general public is much higher than findings from other empirical research" (Zhu 2010:55).

Since couchsurfing relies on a mutual understanding of shared trust, much of the previous literature conducted on couchsurfing has attempted to frame the ability, thus also the inability, to couchsurf as related to how various aspect of couchsurfing (the website, local

groups and events) come together to create a system that allows for the building of this mutual trust.

The Trust Factor

Even though CouchSurfing.org exists as a space for trust to be developed in many different ways, I agree with previous literature that argues there is an inherent view of trust that nearly all couchsurfers share. Not everyone is able to open up their home to a stranger, and as I have described earlier, even people who are interested and motivated cannot always overcome this problem. Of those couchsurfers who have both hosted and surfed, it appears that these people have a shared ideological perspective that believes in the good nature of human beings. I have talked before about how when couchsurfers get into conflict with one another, it is common for both to re-frame this conflict as a cultural misunderstanding or some other kind of situational excuse. This "benefit of the doubt" logic that I saw arise so often, illustrates that couchsurfers believe that people are not necessarily *bad*, but that situations and circumstances may create problems that can lead to a negative experience. I believe that this occurs because couchsurfers have to rely on the mutual trust of others to such a large extent, that without it, they would be unable to get past the most basic safety and danger issues that stop so many other people in their tracks (i.e. the Resistant). Given this, as one couchsurfer so eloquently put it, there is a "trust factor" that allows for this to occur:

> It is a trust factor. People say, how can you go stay with a stranger? What if they are a bad person? What if they try to do something? What if they try to rob you? What if they kill you, whatever? And I think whenever you mention something about couchsurfing they think these are strangers, how can you do this? . . . Yeah, there could be the person completely lying on there, you know. There could be this person that says, I am this person from this place and they aren't really and that probably does happen. But I think most people, <u>you have to trust that most people in general are honest</u>. - Harriet

Even though there appears to be a consensus, this viewpoint is not universal. For the small number of Apprehensive who were able to become couchsurfers, it appeared that these individuals didn't adhere to the 'trusting impulse' to the same level as the other couchsurfers.

People in couchsurfing are incredibly trusting. It's really kind of inspiring what they will do, and like I wish I could be that way sometime and be that trusting with people. . . — Ethan

I cannot say for certain if it was their doubts and fears that clouded their ability to fully trust people, or if they never actually held the belief that humans are inherently trustworthy in the first place. Nonetheless, this view of trust isn't an outlook on the world that all couchsurfers adhere to prior to joining, but it is an appearance that is necessary and must be maintained for couchsurfing to continue existing and functioning, one that the couchsurfing community and CouchSurfing.org help bring about and reinforce with its members. Trust is treated as an ideal, something that not everyone has, but must be worked to achieve.

Trust is Key, Literally

Just as sharing house keys serves as a symbol of trust in our day-to-day lives, the same can be said about couchsurfing. The act of giving someone a key to your home can be a very powerful sign of confidence with that person. Normally, exchanging of keys is only done between people who know each other well and already have an established relationship, such as a friend or co-worker. In couchsurfing, it is a fairly common occurrence for a host to offer the surfer a key to the house even though they have never met before and are *virtually* strangers — pun intended. Prior to meeting for the first time, the only things they know about the other person is what they have gathered from reading their online profile and from the brief interactions that are necessary to agree to and organize a couchsurfing trip. This typically includes just a few back and forth emails or texts, and rarely even phone calls. While the circumstances in handing out a house key to a couchsurfer may be unique, this act still requires a great deal of trust in the other person to take place. Even though not every host will hand out keys to everyone they encounter, just the fact that this is a routine part of couchsurfing shows how powerful couchsurfing can be in creating an environment of trust that can be shared between a host and surfer. Trust is key, literally.

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In her book, Paula Bialski (2012) briefly addressed her own experiences within couchsurfing and the benefits that having a key brought to her while surfing. She discussed how "[f]or the intimately mobile, keys symbolize a sense of security and access to shelter and a feeling of 'home.' Possessing a "spare" key, and not relying on one's host to give them access to the home provides a sense of control over the space. Not reliant on one's host for access to this shelter, I could enter and exit the home as I pleased. . . While placing my host's key on my keychain, I felt a sense of security. . . While this sense of security through key-possession leaves me the moment I give back my key to my host in Stockholm, I am confident I will receive another key in my next destination" (Bialski 2012:70).

Bialski views the 'key exchange' as one of the great benefits that couchsurfing has over traditional forms of tourism, emphasizing its importance because: "This is a rarity — to be able to access a 'home' and not a hotel room or hostel, while being in fact, in a foreign place" (Bialski, 70). Through this, couchsurfers are able to experience what could be considered a more comfortable and secure feeling due to the 'home-ness' that this may provide. Being treated *like* a friend. But these benefits only exist when a surfer is allowed full access to the home, which is not always the case. In fact, since such a small number of hosts in my sample even mentioned handing out keys to their surfers, this 'key exchange' may actually be a 'key situation' that could lead to more problems than it helps answer.

As I heard more and more of these 'key' stories, I realized just how important this act was to both parties within a couchsurfing interaction. Although a good portion of surfers I have talked to told me similar stories about being given keys by their hosts so they could come and go as they please, in most of these cases the host would still be accessible to the surfer — usually a phone call away, with the host either being at work, home, or just doing their own thing around town. This appears to be the most typical example of hosts handing out keys.

No couchsurfer I spoke to mentioned handing out a spare house key to their surfer as part of their normal routine when they host someone. This occurrence was normally seen as a

last resort for situations where the host felt that giving out a key was necessary for the surfer to continue staying with them. Some extenuating circumstances almost force hosts to give their surfer a key, like an emergency. But there are no real norms about this, giving out a key depends highly on the host's preference. Sometimes it is even possible to have hosted or surfed a handful of times and never get into a situation where keys must be exchanged. I met a couple who had only hosted a couple of times prior to their first surfing experience, and they didn't even realize hosts sometimes give out their keys until one of their first hosts did just that; they were very surprised by this:

> One thing we did not expect was the amount of people who would give us their house keys right when we walked in the door, because we never did that. *That's true, as hosts we never did that even though that was something we would look for as surfers. That something that we have never done. . .* But so the first time that happened to us when we were surfing some place, we were like, really? Cool. I guess it is because we didn't really know what to expect when we were staying with other people for several nights. I guess we expected to be able to use their kitchen to cook food. — Harry & Maude

This problem of not knowing what your options are, and also the expectations of the surfer/host relationship, ultimately can lead to conflict. I saw this happen to Natalie. She and her host had established that there would be a small amount of conflict of time since her host would be at work during most of the day. She assumed that he would give her a spare key but when the time came for this to occur, it didn't. When she learned that she would be locked out of his home (her travel 'safe haven') this left her with a whole slew of new problems: what to take with her for the day? everything? or just the essentials? Ultimately, this small issue can, and typically does, create even more problems.

This differs dramatically from how most forms of tourism accommodations work because no matter where you would be sleeping during your trip, in a hotel, motel, hostel, or even a camping tent, you would nearly always have access to these accommodations, which act as your own personalized safe zone during your travels. In the case of couchsurfing, the potential loss of control over this aspect of a person's travel experience could lead to detrimental effects.

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I personally only had one host who allowed for me to surf during a time of the week when she would be working. This situation made the key problem ever so more apparent since it was certain that my host would be busy at work throughout most of the day. If not given a key, I knew this would mean that I would be stuck outside and on my own until my host got off work — which would be roughly eight or so hours later. Luckily this host lived not too far from my own home, so the key situation didn't end up being much of a problem for me because I knew I could just drive home if any kind of situation arose. But if I had been traveling further away, without access to a car, this would have been much more problematic and stressful for me than the minor annoyance it ended up being. Throughout the interviews, I found many more cases where surfers were in situations which led them to be stuck outside a house, without a key, waiting for their host to arrive. Nearly all these situations happened while traveling abroad.

To avoid this, the majority of hosts prefer to open their couches to surfers for times when they are free from strict life commitments like work. This means that they will be able to spend more time interacting with their guest and do things together like showing them around town, as well as bypassing the key situation. It becomes unnecessary for a host give out his or her keys since their schedules wouldn't conflict, allowing for easier access to the house. It is even less of an issue if they decide to spend each day together throughout the couchsurfing experience.

Experienced couchsurfers appear to be more cognizant of the importance of the key situation and tend to address it upfront, such as being explicitly stated somewhere on their online profile (usually listed on the 'Couch Information' section) or noted during the email or phone exchange prior to surfing. For example, one of my hosts, Andrew (an experienced couchsurfer who has hosted over twenty times), wrote "Staying alone in my place will be negotiable but not an absolute, usually I'm comfortable with giving you a key, but that's on a case by case basis." But not everyone is so direct. Sometimes it is just implied through hearing

about your hosts schedule and plans during your stay. Some hosts are still uncomfortable with the whole key situation and therefore may just try to avoid it as much as possible.

It is important to establish expectations within couchsurfing because without them there is a chance that misunderstandings or other types of issues could occur. Without knowing if you will be able to freely enter or leave your hosts home, there is the ever present worry that you could be left in a situation where you are locked out, or in, the house and must wait until your host has returned. To combat this reliance on the host, both surfers and hosts tend to plan ahead together to avoid such scheduling conflicts. It is usually at this point in time where the 'key situation' comes up, either directly or indirectly.

There are some hosts who have taken this a step further, where even other couchsurfers doubt they would be comfortable doing the same:

> There are people who literally just say, "here is my key" and you can come and go as you want. So there are people on every end of the spectrum. I'm generally less comfortable with having people come and go when I'm not there, and that sort of thing. But I know my roommate stayed with, he couchsurfed with a guy that wasn't even there that whole weekend. Just gave him a key to the apartment. He actually had my roommate host other people at his apartment. My roommate was hosting people in Poland at a Polish guy's house while the Polish guy was in Germany! So yeah, some people are willing to just turn it over and the run of my house. But I generally like to be there when they're there. — Ethan

The story Ethan told above about his roommate was one of the more extreme examples of the amount of trust that couchsurfers can have with one another. Not only did the host hand Ethan's friend a key to his house, but also left him there alone without any kind of oversight whatsoever. By doing this, the host entrusted the surfer with his home and also every single thing found within it, from the most mundane material objects to the host's most prized personal possessions. While this was not the norm, it was common enough for most people to know at least one person to whom this happened. Overall, much variation in personal trust can be found in the couchsurfing community. Some people are perfectly nonchalant about handing over their keys, while others go through meticulous deliberations. But in the end, more couchsurfing hosts give out their keys than don't. So even if not all couchsurfers hold the same level of trust in

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others, we can conclude that even the couchsurfers who trust the least, still trust enough to be able to couchsurf.

Sharing Trust With Outsiders:

So far I have discussed trust in two different ways, one where it is an intrinsic part of the couchsurfers personality and mindset, while the other is situated in the couchsurfing environment and interaction itself. Both of these need to be present to at least some extent in order for mutual trust to exist between the two couchsurfers. But this account of trust doesn't include the full picture of everyone you meet during a couchsurfing interaction, which involves more than just the host and the surfer, but also people the hosts encounter in their day to day life. It's pretty common to meet the friends and/or family of the host you are staying with, and many times these people can become just as big a part of your couchsurfing experience as your host. Therefore, issues of trust can be examined from their point of view as well.

Although the mutual trust exchanged by couchsurfers is grounded in the norms and expectations found within couchsurfing itself, many times this seemingly strong stranger-to-stranger trust bond becomes shared to the host's friends as well. We can see this in action below, when Harriet describes a story about when her friend even went beyond Harriet's comfort level of trust, when her friend offered the surfer access to her car.

> There was one girl who surfed with me and she took the train up here from San Antonio and she was here for a long weekend and she was thinking she was going to take the buses. . . [but] we found out it didn't even run on weekends . . . So I was like, "I can try to drop you off but I'm kind of limited by my schedule" and then my friend who was not a couchsurfer (but she knew what it was). She said to me, "we are co-workers and live in the same [apartment] complexes and work in classrooms next to each other. If we carpool to work, she can use my car." I mean, *here is my friend basically offering to lend a perfect stranger her car. For all she knew this girl was going to just take off with it.* I don't know, I don't know if I would have done that but I certainly said to this girl, "here you can have a key to my apartment." — Harriett

Harriet's friend was not a couchsurfer, yet offered her keys to the surfer without even batting an eye. But how and why did this happen? Is it trust shared? Friends-of-hosts tend to

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put a lot of trust in surfers. It is as though the hosts trust of the surfer rubs off on them, or maybe they don't fully understand the roles that the host/surfer are playing and end up attributing trust to the individual who is surfing rather than his or her position as a couchsurfer and the roles that they are playing. CouchSurfing.org has been designed to help facilitate trust between its members through its tools (reference system) helping couchsurfers gain enough trust to actually follow through with the whole process. But Harriett's friend, as well as other non-couchsurfers, show similar signs of trust towards surfers even though they have not gone through this heavy selection process themselves nor even seen the website before.

What I learned most from my fieldwork while surfing was that I was widely accepted, and in many cases trusted, by my host's non-couchsurfing friends. During my first time surfing, my host and I went to her friend's dinner party together. It was fascinating being there, interacting with their family and friends, as if I were just a normal friend-of-a-friend. It just felt so normal. What I found so strange about this situation was that only hours prior, my host told me these same exact people "wouldn't ever do anything like this." But here I was, a stranger, in their house. They even had a little toddler who I played games with while they were in the kitchen cooking dinner. How could they fear the dangers of couchsurfing, yet still trust me enough to allow me into their home and around their children? We all talked about couchsurfing a bit that night, and what my host told me was accurate. Their reactions to the idea of couchsurfing were fairly typical, but instead of being outright against it, most fell into the "Apprehensive" category of people who thought it sounded like a cool and interesting idea but just weren't personally comfortable enough with the idea to actually do it.

One of my hosts friends even told me that they liked how their friend couchsurfed since 'it's fun being able to meet people like you." Couchsurfing gives not only the host the chance to meet people from all walks of life and from across the globe, but those within their social circle benefit as well. Every single time I surfed, I had the opportunity to be allowed into my host's social circle and interact with their friends and/or family. While I have been introduced to other

couchsurfers this way, the majority of the time I end up hanging out with my host's non-couchsurfing friends or a mix of both. I believe that my rarity of meeting other couchsurfers was because of the fact that the many of the people who hosted me were not very involved with the local couchsurfing community, leaving them to have little to no other couchsurfing friends in their 'social circle' for me to interact with while surfing.

Surprisingly, my interactions with my hosts friends (no matter if they were couchsurfers or not) were virtually the same. However, their couchsurfing friends were easier to talk to since we knew we had at least one thing in common. For the non-couchsurfing friends though, it was like my status as a couchsurfer didn't really matter to them. Other than the obligatory 'tell them about your thesis, Rory!', wherein I would explain the basics of what I was doing and why I was there, the conversations rarely got much deeper than that. Most of the time when I was around these non-couchsurfers I never really felt like a couchsurfer, and more like just another acquaintance of the host.

When I was in a group situation, I often felt as if my presence didn't really impact their normal social interactions whatsoever. I heard so many typical daily life stories from these people, what's been going on at work/school, issues with personal relationships, reminiscing about times of the past, etc. It all seemed so normal, so mundane, yet interesting, like things my own friends and I would talk about when we just chilling and hanging out. But when it came time to go back to my hosts home, the social dynamic would change back to what it was before — one of slowly learning more about the other person and establishing our relevance to each other. Even though we had couchsurfing as a similarity to talk about, these one-on-one interactions could sometimes be much more awkward than when we were in a group since we both had to put more effort into learning about each other and finding similar things in common to talk about and bond over.

Overall, the experience of being around all my hosts' friends made me realize how much friendship can matter in determining the trust of a stranger. While I never was put into any

situation where my host's, or his or her friend's trust in me was tested to the extent Harriet mentioned earlier, they still trusted me since their friend (my host) trusted me. Even though many times his or her friends didn't quite understand the foundation of our trust, couchsurfing's "mutual trust", they ended up extending their own trust to me regardless. There is also the possibility that not understanding the circumstances and issues surrounding couchsurfing may help make these people more trusting of couchsurfers. Since they see their friend (the host) being so open and trusting, they may misinterpret the trust as being deeper and on a more personal level than it really is. However, this "shared trust" amongst non-couchsurfers phenomenon that I found is important in establishing how powerful mutual shared trust in couchsurfing can be. Where else can you not only find people who are willing to open up their homes to strangers, but their friends as well?

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

In the last chapter I discussed many of the potential *barriers* that can exist within couchsurfing. While some of these individual barriers may have a more powerful affect on one person than another, they share many common elements. Danger-Risk, Trust-Safety, these are all interrelated. By examining each of these barrier related issues, this study was able to discover how *participation* in couchsurfing is tied to these few central issues and problems.

As we have seen, couchsurfing is grounded in the subjectivity of its users, from their preferences for a certain host/surfer to the specific types of barriers which affect them. When discussing the elements of barriers, such as trust or danger, many couchsurfers treated these subjects as entirely different concepts — with their own problems and issues to overcome. The act of choosing a host or surfer to stay with is very subjective. Certain characteristics and behaviors are seen as universally ideal and necessary, such as being mindful of one another's privacy/belongings and even cleanliness. But when it comes to narrowing the selection down to a single person, the smallest of things, like a favorite TV show or band, can shift their decision from one person to another. But this shift is not always a positive one, just as liking something in common helps, liking something they don't can put you on the chopping block. Everything from determining risk and danger (looking at things like profile pictures, how they talk, etc.) to building trust (pre-surfing online interactions, the 'key' situation), leaves many aspects of couchsurfing interactions up to the interpretations negotiated between the host and the surfer.

This subjective nature leaves everyone who joins CouchSurfing.org to their own ideas about what is expected of and necessary from the people with whom they choose to interact. Tan (2010) brings up how Mollering's (2006) idea of "leap of faith" in trust is necessary to bridge this gap of the "unknown", but I would argue that this 'leap' extends much further than only trust,

to an interplay of all the barrier related issues I have discussed so far. I believe in addition to trust there needs to be enough safety, comfort, privacy, and favorable motivations, for the couchsurfer to have enough faith to jump in the first place!

Couchsurfers who joined with doubts and hesitations about the legitimacy of couchsurfing were ultimately able to overcome barriers in some way (compartmentalize vs. overcome). The majority of these people didn't always confront problems directly, but found other ways to make couchsurfing more compatible for themselves personally. For example, I found that couchsurfers impacted by gender related barriers typically chose to surf only with those of the same sex as themselves to counter these problems. Also, issues of privacy and comfort can limit whether or not a person is open to hosting and surfing, with most people either holding a preference for, or limiting themselves to, one over another. There are even couchsurfers out there who have never slept on anyone's couch a day in their life, yet they are still considered a couchsurfer since they are a part of this community. By only going to local events or choosing to meet up with fellow couchsurfers while traveling, these people may not experience the full offerings of what couchsurfing offers but they are able to sample it in a way that is comfortable and accessible to them.

Looking at barriers in this light, we can begin to see how our agency can be limited by the "options" that are available to us. The belief "a person can accomplish anything as long as they put their mind to it" may be true, but this truth relies on the mind (i.e. *perceptions*) to create a distinction between a realistic and acceptable choice versus something unrealistic or even unimaginable. There are many more people who don't couchsurf than do. For some of these people, couchsurfing may be as realistic a travel choice for them personally as deciding to quit their job and join the circus. Absurd? Yes, but that's the point. When it comes to human agency, we are only limited by the rational choices that we believe exist. There is no limit to human actions, only barriers which limit choices.

<u>5.1 Response to Current Couchsurfing Literature</u>

My findings also appear to confirm, and deny, aspects of Paula Bialski's research discussed in her new book, "Becoming Intimately Mobile" (2012). In that book, Bialski argues that technologies like Couchsurfing create an environment where ". . . people must renegotiate their definition of stranger, trust, intimacy, and utility in order to enter into interaction/exchange with another. This renegotiation creates a desire for trust and intimacy with strangers, and *also creates a lasting impact on the way a person interacts once returning home* (pg. 11 - emphasis added)." My findings support her conclusions, but also raise questions about how much a person's perceptions and beliefs can change through the act of couchsurfing. From Bialski's perspective, it appears as though anyone could be placed into a couchsurfing interaction and over time become more comfortable and open to the necessities of couchsurfing (i.e., mutual trust, limited privacy, et cetera). I found numerous cases that reinforce this conclusion, such as when a person new to couchsurfing, or even a veteran's friends, would slowly become integrated into aspects of the couchsurfing lifestyle by witnessing how enjoyable and normal the whole process can be. It is this firsthand account of experiencing the positive aspects of couchsurfing that allows for preconceived notions and stereotypes to be diminished. This "shared couchsurfing experience" almost always ended in the non-couchsurfer viewing couchsurfing in a much more positive light.

However, I found very few cases where this positive experience shifted them enough in the direction to want to *become a couchsurfer,* to do it themselves. There was even one informant, Ethan, who only began to co-couchsurf with his already established couchsurfing friend when they lived and traveled together. After they both moved away to different cities, Ethan went from a person who would host every month or so to not hosting or surfing at all. Although he gained much experience interacting with other couchsurfers while he and his friend couchsurfed over the past few years, Ethan was never directly involved with the process of finding hosts/surfers and managing the logistical aspects of planning such a thing — he was just

along for the ride. Even though Ethan has yet to couchsurf alone since, his experience of being around his couchsurfing friend opened him up to feeling comfortable enough to attempt such a thing on his own.

Ethan's story reinforces Bialski's (2012) idea that barriers can be lessened by exposure to couchsurfing, but remember that motivations, beliefs, and lifestyle choices are important in establishing whether or not a person can overcome the barriers placed in front of them in the first place. For every story I heard about someone like Ethan, I found a similar story which ended in the opposite way. Lacey, a female couchsurfer in her mid-20s, talked at length about how her non-couchsurfing female college roommate felt after she hosted two college aged men in their apartment together. Even though the roommate only learned a few days prior to the guys arriving, she told Lacey she was fine with the circumstances. During the days the surfers were there, the roommate had a few nice conversations with them and even had dinner with everyone one night, but the majority of the time she kept to herself in her room - with her door closed. After the surfers left, the roommate confided in Lacey that the whole experience was nowhere near as uncomfortable and strange as she had imagined. But even having a fairly positive experience, she still felt very hesitant about couchsurfing in general. She believed that her positive experience was not the norm, but the exception. They lucked out and didn't get a weirdo, but who knows, what about the next people? Now that Lacey's roommate had done it once, she decided she wasn't able to be comfortable enough to ever try it again. Lacey complied, never hosting another person until the two parted ways almost a year later.

These cases show that even when given the same stimuli, experiencing couchsurfing interactions, one can end up with opposite reactions. Why is this the case? Due to the subjectivity of an individual's barriers, I had a difficult time tracing a *root cause*. Current couchsurfing literature points towards trust as the main factor in being able to couchsurfing successfully, but I believe that this issue is more multifaceted than that and other barrier related issues must be examined. Every issue discussed within this thesis, from how people interpret

online profiles to their personal history of victimization of robbery, can become a focal point that either allows for a barrier to be completely broken down or built up even higher and stronger. Therefore, I concluded Bialski's (2012) claim that it is the couchsurfing experience causing people to re-frame issues like trust cannot be viewed as universal. She is correct when a person is already open enough to couchsurfing in the first place; *Inclined* or at the upper spectrum of *Apprehensive*. When looking at outsiders or people initially lacking motivations to couchsurf, we see a subtle change in attitudes but rarely does this experience allow them to couchsurf alone and unhindered. Barriers then, affect people differently depending on their own attitudes and the circumstances that surround them.

5.2 Classifying Couchsurfing Barriers

I spent a great deal of time not only attempting to discover the issues and problems that face couchsurfers and outsiders alike, but also how these issues can become barriers that restrict how an individual is able to participate in couchsurfing. I organized each of these problems into categories that work at separate levels and affects each of the different types of couchsurfers in varying degrees: Outsider barriers   (external/social), Personalized Barriers (internal/psychological), and Participation Barriers (situational/subjective).

Outsider barriers are named that way to emphasize issues that are typically only seen as barriers by people outside the couchsurfing community, namely the Resistant. This category of barriers is encompasses external forces that the individual cannot control. It includes the threat of being robbed, assaulted, taken advantage of, or victimized in any other way. These are the safety and danger issues that are by far the most prevalent and powerful barriers to couchsurfing. Gender related barriers would also fit into this category. However, couchsurfers themselves are nowhere near influenced and affected by all of these issues as those outside of this community. They couchsurf despite these problems, and for many of them, couchsurfing is not considered dangerous or risky at all.

Internal barriers include any psychological feelings that cause a person to become anxious and doubtful about couchsurfing in general. These are commonly tied to accumulative barriers that are a part of, and work in conjunction with, other barriers that include *comfort*, *privacy*, *fear*, and *trust*. People in the Apprehensive category of potential couchsurfer typically feel the brunt of these barriers. Not only are the outsider barrier issues affecting them, their drive and motivations to couchsurf could help push against these same barriers even harder resulting in more distress since they are more likely to actual put themselves out there and attempt to couchsurf. This differs for the Resistant, who may only be influenced by these internal barriers during the moments that they are thinking about the idea of couchsurfing, or placing themselves in other couchsurfers shoes.

Participation barriers rely on establishing a connect to others through participation in couchsurfing. These barriers problematic on a case-by-case basis and can be purely situational, such as not having the resources to travel or the space to host. These 'situational' issues disproportionally impacted Inclined couchsurfers. However, participation barriers also include the impact of person-to-person interactions and perceptions; for example, developing trust with another couchsurfer. While this type of barrier encompasses all other barriers due to the great amount of variation seen between people's internal psychological barriers and their choice of participating in couchsurfing only under certain circumstances, how they interpret the situations and people they encounter dictate how powerful these barriers will become. For example, when looking for a host or surfer, interviewees would describe how small subtle things found on profiles (like a person's profile picture) could set off "red flags" for them. This would typically trigger feelings of discomfort or fear which would ultimately lead to distrust in that person.

<u>5.3 Problems & Future Research</u>

One aspect that future social science research should further examine is how people outside a subculture being studied can dramatically influence it. A considerable portion of this paper discussed couchsurfing "outsiders." Since couchsurfers account for such a small portion of the world's population, *outsiders* represent more than people who may disregard or have negative feelings about couchsurfing; they symbolize and reflect a larger part of society. The fact that people do react negatively shows that there are societal issues that form and reinforce the belief that couchsurfing is unacceptable or suspect at least.

It was not my original intention to examine outsiders in this way. This developed slowly throughout the research process as I so often heard couchsurfers mention how people would react when they would tell them they were a "couchsurfer". It became clear that these *Resistant* reactions were important in defining couchsurfers' behaviors. For some, the anticipation of negative reactions led them to hide their own status as a couchsurfer, even from those closest to them. It was easier for them to hide this aspect of their lives than to be open about it and have to explain and defend their choice to participate. As a way of saving face, or to avoid discussing issues regarding safety and danger, it was not uncommon for parents to never learn of this aspect of their child's life.

It is doubtful these issues would have been uncovered had I not shifted the study's focus to include this "outsider perspective". If I were to continue in this direction, I would attempt to include firsthand accounts from outsiders. Although my study did address how outsiders interacted with couchsurfers, this was only examined from the perspective of the couchsurfer. While an important aspect in understanding the average couchsurfer's experience, this point of view is unable to confirm how outsiders frame beliefs about couchsurfing as it relies on the assumptions and theories of couchsurfers about why other people do not act and see the world in the same way they do. I found couchsurfers to be fairly vocal about those outside of couchsurfing; could the same be said about the outsiders as well? Is couchsurfing as divisive a

topic as many surfers and hosts have led me to believe? This focus could also open more avenues of studying how couchsurfing interactions can be changed by the presence of outsiders.

Although the differences between how couchsurfers and non-couchsurfers interpret, build, and are influenced by barriers is important in illustrating the power and intensity that a specific barrier can hold, this issue should not be completely viewed through the lens of the insider/outsider dichotomy, but by how these differences ultimately influence the interactions found within couchsurfing itself. For example, couchsurfing couples, like couchsurfer - non-counchsurfer relationships, may not be completely in agreement with respect to the amount of trust or comfort they hold for other surfers and hosts they will encounter while couchsurfing. By studying specific outsider cases such as this, we should be able to further understand how individuality and differences influence the establishment and deconstruction of barriers. Variation in the construction of personal barriers (for couchsurfers and non-couchsurfers alike) will be one of the most apparent issues facing couchsurfing as it continues to grow in members and expands its reach further as a new way of tourism.

<u>5.4 The Future of Couchsurfing</u>

To decipher the future of couchsurfing, barriers that restrict couchsurfing from becoming a mainstream success as a form of tourism must be more closely examined. The world is always changing and is filled with people of different backgrounds, motivations, and needs. Just as diversity is found in people across the globe, we will see variation in how people approach couchsurfing and perceive barrier related issues. There will always be conflicts between resistant "outsiders" and those who find couchsurfing to be acceptable, normal, or even worthwhile. Such conflict of views is important to consider when predicting the long term viability of couchsurfing. Even though CouchSurfing.org has only recently taken steps to bring a more mainstream audience (such as by turning into a for-profit *B-Corporation* and streamlining the

design of the website) into the couchsurfing world, already some backlash has been seen from some of its most vocal proponents (Chen 2011 - Gawker.com). This backlash isn't strictly about site re-design or changing corporate policies but, as found in my interviews, resistance against a degradation of trust.

For couchsurfers interviewed, the vast majority felt that as CouchSurfing.org became more accessible to the general public, they would ultimately see an increase in the number of *freeloaders* who would "take advantage of the system" and use it for a free place to stay. In a sense, this idea of an increase in people not in it for the *true couchsurfing experience* turned off couchsurfers since they felt they would not be able to trust everyone on the site. While many want couchsurfing to continue to grow, allowing more people to experience it (and finding a host less difficult), they are not comfortable with the idea that just anyone can join the site since not everyone can/will be a good host or surfer. The idea that couchsurfing was a fairly small community made them feel that others on the site were more like them.

As discussed before, perceived similarities are important in establishing mutual trust. The differences in people's backgrounds, cultures, and even personalities and beliefs leads to not only variations in interactions and behaviors, but also expectations. While CouchSurfing.org has not yet attempted to establish and regulate any fundamental rules of behaviors for couchsurfers, there are still many *unwritten rules* which do exist and have become normalized in an established set of normative expectations. By attempting to open up couchsurfing to more and more people, many couchsurfers believe that CouchSurfing.org is eventually going to become a place where it will be difficult even for them to continue to couchsurf. This idea that couchsurfing will become filled with untrustworthy and even potentially dangerous people shows that even couchsurfers have established barriers to participation. Currently, most active couchsurfers have no qualms about staying with people who meet their expectations (i.e., the *typical couchsurfer).* The prospect of others who do not live up to the current ideals and expectations of *who* a couchsurfer should be may ultimately create or intensify barriers. This

could lead to an environment where shared mutual trust cannot continue to exist, rather being replaced by situations in which many current couchsurfers would begin to feel the same discomfort, apprehension, and fear felt by those outside the community today.

Is the future of couchsurfing as grim as some couchsurfers seem to believe? Not entirely. Recall that barriers are not entirely fixed and unchanging. Even though they act as a restrictive force, barriers are still permeable and can be overcome in the right social contexts. Something as simple as couchsurfing with a friend or spouse can make someone go from being absolutely fearful of the idea, to perfectly comfortable. Even in my own experiences, I would encounter the non-couchsurfing friends of my host and be able to interact with and, even in one case, sleep in the same room. Although these cases are not the most common, they underscore the subjective and changeable nature of barriers and the power of the situation.

While the present study is more concerned with how couchsurfers perceive barriers, future research should examine *if* and *how* societal views on barrier-related issues have changed since the inception of CouchSurfing.org and other similar hospitality exchange networks (such as RideShares). Couchsurfing is an important success story in what many researchers are calling "the sharing economy" or "collaborative consumption". Rachel Botsman, co-writer of "What's Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborate Consumption" (2010), has lectured on how CouchSurfing.org is at the forefront of this new movement of *sharing* that which is traditionally considered private or personal with strangers in order to help yourself in the current downtrodden economy. Botsman's TED Talk, "The Currency of the New Economy is Trust" (2012), mentions how similar online communities and services like AirBNB, and TaskRabit, all follow a similar online *reputation* mechanism like CouchSurfing.org's online profiles and reference system which allows trust to be established through interactions and expectations, concluding that, "the people become more important than the space" (2012). Although Botsman never frames her discussions about establishing "trust between strangers" as being dependent on barriers, my research shows that this is often the case.

Since a sharing economy relies on *trust*, both parties who come together to "share" must be open to the level of trust necessary for this sharing exchange to occur in the first place. In this study I talked at great length about forms of sharing trust, like the key exchange, finding some people completely against the idea, while others were so accepting they would just slip their key under their front door mat and let the surfer do as he or she pleased. Everyone was a couchsurfer, but only a select few were comfortable allowing key exchanges like this to occur. When it comes to all the other online communities situated within "the sharing economy," the success of each may depend not only on the level of mutual trust needed for the interactions to go smoothly, but also on the extent to which the average person perceives the potential dangers and related issues as a barrier to their participation within such activities. Using a car sharing service (RideShare, or even the original "slugging" as seen in Washington D.C. in the 1970s) may hold a lower threshold of barrier-related issues than couchsurfing since sharing a ride with a stranger may commit them to being stuck with that person for an hour or so at the most. Couchsurfing, on the other hand, takes significantly more trust since the time together is longer and you have to be able to sleep with them under the same roof. This leaves all communities involved in the sharing economy in a place where their mainstream appeal, or lack of appeal, will relate significantly to the barrier issues and problems that could potentially hinder someone's ability to join in the first place.

Nonetheless, communities within this sharing economy have been witnessing a large increase in their user base over the past few years. People are choosing to join these groups and place themselves in a position of openly trusting other people they have never met before (strangers). Tthe rise of the Internet and its ability to bring both access and trust among people in this new sharing economy is constantly growing. Is CouchSurfing.org at a tipping point to a wider acceptance in our society? Or will it merely remain a unique subculture left to only those adventurous few who are already open to other alternative forms of tourism? Time will tell.

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

<div align="center">

UT Arlington
Informed Consent Document

</div>

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Rory Bradbury
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Phone#: 682-231-3990   E-Mail: rory.bradbury@mavs.uta.edu

FACULTY ADVISOR
Dr. Linda Rouse
Department of Sociology & Anthropology
E-Mail: lrouse@uta.edu

TITLE OF PROJECT
Couchsurfing in North Texas: A Localized View of a Global Phenomenon

INTRODUCTION
You are being asked to participate in a research study about couchsurfing. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinuing your participation at any time will involve no penalty. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

PURPOSE
The specific purpose of this research study is to examine the global phenomenon of couchsurfing by focusing on only a small and localized portion (N. Texas) of the worldwide couchsurfing population. This study will attempt to discover and understand the unique sociological issues and problems faced within this community through the use of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and content analysis.

DURATION
Participation in the interview portion of this study will last approximately for an hour or more. If you will be couchsurfing (hosting) with the researcher, this experience is expected to include two consecutive days for data collection.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
The maximum number of participants in this research study will be 35 couchsurfers.

PROCEDURES
You are being asked to participate in a face-to-face interview in which you will be asked basic questions about your life and your experiences within the couchsurfing community. First you will be handed a demographics survey to fill out, which will include questions regarding basic characteristics about yourself (age, race, gender, etc.)

and couchsurfing. Then when the interview begins, it will be audio recorded. After the interview, the tape will be transcribed, which means they will be typed exactly as they were recorded, word-for-word, by the researcher. The tape will be destroyed after transcription.

If you have agreed to participate in the participant observation portion of this study (*hosting* the researcher), please treat this researcher in the same manner as you would any other couchsurfer. The data collection process will involve the researcher observing and taking notes, while also asking relevant questions (which may be tape recorded with your permission) about the current activities and issues found throughout this couchsurfing interaction.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS
You may benefit from talking about yourself and your couchsurfing experiences with someone who finds your life and experiences interesting. Also by discussing a wide range of topics and issues related to couchsurfing, these questions raised during the interview process may help you think about and discuss topics and issues that are important to you, and even some that you may have never really thought about in the past, thus gain a better understanding of your own participation within the overall couchsurfing community.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS
There are no perceived risks or discomforts for participating in this research study. Should you experience any discomfort please inform the researcher, you have the right to quit any study procedures at any time at no consequence. Any new information developed during the study that may affect your willingness to continue participation will be communicated to you.

COMPENSATION
There will no compensation for participating in this study.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES
There are no alternative procedures offered for this study. However, you can elect not to participate in the study or quit at any time at no consequence.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION
Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to decline participation in any or all study procedures or quit at any time at no consequence.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of this signed consent form and all data collected including transcriptions and audio

recordings from this study will be stored at UTA (in University Hall – Room 443) for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the UTA Institutional Review Board (IRB), and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at UTA has reviewed and approved this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review your research records, the University of Texas at Arlington will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS
Questions about this research study may be directed to Dr. Linda Rouse, who can be reached by email at lrouse@uta.edu. Any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-2105 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

_____
Signature and printed name of principal investigator or person obtaining consent
Date

CONSENT

By signing below, you confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time.

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.

_____
SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER
DATE

APPENDIX B

PRE-INTERVIEW DEMOGRAPHICS SURVEY

Instructions: The following survey consists of basic demographics questions about yourself, as well as a few questions pertaining to your specific couchsurfing experiences. If you wish to skip any of the questions, you may do so. But please try to complete this survey fully and to the best of your ability. And remember to *circle your answer choices*.

Personal Information:

#1. Please specify your Gender: 1) Male   2) Female

#2. What is your age? _____ Years

#3. What racial classification do you self-identify as?

      1) White   2) Black/African American 3) Asian/Pacific Islander
            4) Native American   5) Other (Please Specify): _____

#4. Are you currently in a relationship?   1)Yes   2)No

If you answered 'yes' to the question above (#4), continue to the next question… if not, please skip to question #7
      #5. Is your partner also a couchsurfer?   1) Yes   2) No
      #6. Does your partner couchsurf with you?   1) Yes   2) No

#7. Your political ideology would be best described as:

Very										*Very*
Liberal					*Moderate*					
Conservative										
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

#8. What is your religious affiliation?
      1) Protestant   4) Jewish   7) Buddhist
        2) Roman Catholic   5) Muslim   8) Hindu
          3) Evangelical Christian   6) Agnostic or Atheist
9) Other: _____

#9. How would you define your social class during your upbringing? Your family was:
      1) Poor   2) Lower Middle Class   3) Middle Class   4) Upper Middle Class   5) Rich

#10. Are you a native of Texas?   1) Yes   2) No

#11. On a scale from 1 to 5 (with 5 being the highest), how much "Texas Pride" do you have?

Not At All   *Moderately*   *Very Proud*

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

#12. On the same scale, how proud are you of being an American?

Not At All   *Moderately*   *Very Proud*

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

#13. Do you consider yourself to be a "global citizen"?
        1) Not at all   2) A little   3) Somewhat   4) A lot   5) Very much so

The following questions are a series of statements, circle the answer that best defines you.

#14: I am open to new relationships: Yes   No   Sometimes

#15: I can become friends with certain people instantly: Yes   No   Sometimes

#16: I can instantly tell if someone is an interesting person: Yes   No   Sometimes

#17. I don't mind sharing my inner thoughts and feelings with people I find interesting:
                                                                Yes   No   Sometimes

#18. On a scale of 0 to 10, how introverted or extroverted do you consider yourself?

Very Introverted   *Very Extroverted*

           0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Couchsurfing Information:

#19. How long have you participated in couchsurfing?
1) Less than 6 months   2) 6 months to a year   3) One Year   4) Two Years   5) 3+ Years

#20. Approximately how many times have you:
        a) surfed (in total) ____ ?
        b) hosted (in total) ____?

#21. Approximately how many of your host/surfers do you keep in touch with on a regular basis (give %)? _____

#22. What is the average number of hours you spend daily interacting with your CS host/guest?
        1) 0-1   2) 1-3   3) 3-6   4) 6-8   5) More than 8

#23. In your past CouchSurfing experiences, have you ever become emotionally close with your host/surfer? (you've shared your thoughts, dreams, insights, problems?)
1) Yes   2) No

#24. How often do you and your host/surfer become emotionally close (you share your thoughts, dreams, insights, problems)?
        1) Never   2) Rarely   3) Sometimes   4) Often   5) Always

#25. How often do you access the CouchSurfing.org website?
        1) Daily   2) A few times a week   3) Once a week   4) A few times a month   5) Once a month or less

#26. Do you participate in local couchsurfing events or activities?   1) Yes
        2) No

#27. Which do you prefer?
        1) Surfing (as a guest)   2) Hosting other couchsurfers

#28. Do you prefer to couchsurf with people who are of the same sex as you?
        1) Yes   2) No   3) Don't Care

#29. How important is couchsurfing to your daily life?
        1) Not at all   2) Somewhat   3) Fairly   4) Very   5) Extremely

#30. In general, how important is —"personal growth" to you?
1) Not important   2) Somewhat important   3) Important   4) Very important
5)Extremely important

#31. Looking back at your CouchSurfing experiences, how often have you encountered a sense of "deep connection" with a surfer or host?
        1) Never   2) Seldom   3) Sometimes 4) Often   5) Always

#32. What is your primary motivation to travel?
        1) Seeing interesting sights of the world
        2) Personal growth/personal development (learning about yourself and the world around you)
        3) Meeting and building relationships with people from around the world
        4) To relax

5) To escape daily responsibilities
6) To see family
7) For business
8) Other _____

#33. What do you learn from your Couchsurfing hosts/guests?
        1) Information about local life and culture (language, food, dress, etc.)
        2) How to perform a certain task (ex. cook, do yoga, speak in another language)
        3) Their personal philosophy or religion
        4) Their past life experiences
        5) Their life goals/passions
        6) Travel tips
        7) All of the above
        8) Other _____
        9) I generally don't learn from my Couchsurfing hosts/guests.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The Individual – Life History

Q1 -"Everybody has a life story. Why don't you tell me a little about your life?"
- Family background, important life events, etc.

Q2 - "What's the most important thing you want people to know about you?"
- Do you have a motto for life? (personal philosophy?)
- Any life goals?

Discovering couchsurfing

Q3 - What is couchsurfing?
- What is the goal/intent of couchsurfing?
  - Does CouchSurfing.org's goals match your own?
- What does couchsurfing mean to you?

Q4 - What first sparked your interest in couchsurfing? How did you discover it?
- Friends, Internet, etc.

Q5 - What attracted you to the idea of couchsurfing?
- Traveling? Meeting new people? Etc.

Q6 - What were your initial reactions/thoughts when you first heard about it?
- Positive or negative? Both?
- What were your *friends* and *family's* reactions when you told them you wanted to CS?
  - How did their reactions make you feel (impact you)?

Q7 - Were you ever hesitant to participate in couchsurfing?
- What about the problems of danger? – Safety & Security? Trust? (barriers)
  - Do you think these issues affect men and women differently?
- How were you able to overcome these problems?/Why weren't these problems for you?
  - Do you think other couchsurfers feel the same way?

Q8 - What steps did you take in order to learn "how to be a couchsurfer"?
- Did you read every page of CouchSurfing.org? or did you just jump right in?
- Are there rules to couchsurfing? If so, how did you learn them?
  - Norms, roles, etc.

Q9 - What were your initial expectations of couchsurfing when you started? What did you expect/want to encounter?
- Did your first couchsurfing experience live up to your expectations?

- How have your views on couchsurfing changed overtime?

Q10 - What is your opinion of the couchsurfing community as a whole?
- Are there any problems or issues you see occurring?
- Is there anything you would want to change? Or make sure stays the same?

The Couchsurfer

Q11 - Can you describe "the average couchsurfer" to me?
- Characteristics, beliefs, attitudes, etc.
- Why do they participate? (motivations and intent)
- If they say "There is no 'average Couchsurferer', we are all different…"
  - Ask, 'so, what makes you so different?'
    - Culture, life experiences, characteristics, etc?
  - Do you think other couchsurfers from your own culture (Americans), and local DFW couchsurfers, are different from you as well?

Q12 - Do you consider yourself to be an "average" couchsurfer?
- What do you think are the similarities/differences between yourself and the others?
- Do you think most couchsurfers would agree with you?

Q13 - What makes a good host? How about a good surfer/guest? (ideal?)
- Does the 'average couchsurfer' match up to this 'ideal couchsurfer' you have just described?
- Do certain kinds/types of people make better hosts or surfers (from your own criteria)?

Q14 - Since we have established what makes a good couchsurfer, is there anything that makes a "bad" couchsurfer? If so, please describe. (deviant?)
- If no — What about people who use and abuse the system? (freeloaders, people trying to get dates, etc.)

Online Experiences

Q15 - Tell me about how you created your online profile. How did you decide on what to write about yourself?
- The issue of self-disclosure, and presentation of self…
- Did you ever worry about how other couchsurfers would interpret your profile? (less likely to get someone to agree to host/surf with you)
- Have you changed your profile in any way since you started? If so, how and why?

Q16 - How do you choose who you want to couchsurf with?

- There are dozens of profiles to choose from, what do you personally look for in a host?
  What about when screening for surfers to stay on your own couch?
    - o Any specific characteristics, traits, or beliefs that are necessary?
    - o Do you have any "deal breakers"? (politics, religion, etc.)
      - ▪ If so, how do you determine if a person will have that problem?
- Would you be willing for the website to randomly select for you? Or do you need to look at a person's profile before you know if you would be comfortable couchsurfing with them? (a trust issue?)

Q17 - Describe to me what you normally do on the website.
- Do you interact with any other couchsurfers online? Group discussions, etc?
  - o Or is the only interaction seen when requesting couches?
- Do you ever update your online profile? If so, how often?
  - o What do you normally change in these situations?
- Tell me about CouchSurfing.org's "Reference System"?
  - o How do you decided what to write on someone's profile?
    - ▪ How do you classify a positive, neutral, and negative rating? (examples)

Offline Experiences
Q18 - What usually happens when you meet someone offline and face-to-face for the first time?
- How do you normally feel? (Excited? Nervous? Uncomfortable? etc)
  - o Has there ever been a situation where you didn't feel this way? If so, what made that situation so different?
- Do you think these feelings are normal for most people?

Q19 - Tell me about your best couchsurfing experience? What about the worst?
- How have these two events changed your views on couchsurfing?

Q20 - How do you normally prepare for a couchsurfing experience?
- As a host — Do you do anything to get ready for a guest/surfer? (e.g. cleanup, hide anything you don't want them to see, etc.)
- Surfer — Anything special you do to prepare?

Q21 - How do you deal with the issue of 'privacy'? Any privacy concerns?
- Is your own privacy important to you?
  - o Do you think most people feel this way?
- Who do you think privacy is more of an issue for, a host or a surfer? Why?
- Are there any topics that are too private or taboo to discuss when couchsurfing?
  - o Has anyone ever brought up something you didn't want to talk about? If so, how did you deal with that situation?

Q22 - Is there any belief you hold, or past behavior you have done, that you do not tell other Couchsurfers?
- Is fear of being ostracized by the community a factor?

Q23 - When staying at other people houses, do you ever have to change your normal behavior? (what you are like at home)
- Do you think most people change their behavior in some way? How so?

Q24 - What is the most important factor in determining how well you will get along with the other CS?
   - What are the most problematic? (Personality *mismatch*?)
- Have you ever had a CS experience where their intent for participating differed from yours? (Looking for a date, etc. – *this is not what this community is about*)
   - Gender issues?

Local Interactions – Group Activities (offline).
Q25 - Do you feel a sense of community within couchsurfing?
- Is it global? What about locally in the DFW area?
   - If both, how do they differ?

Q26 - Have you ever participated in any local couchsurfing events? If so, tell me about your experiences in them.
- Are these an important part of the couchsurfing community?
- What kind of couchsurfers do this? who doesn't? (differences?)

Q27 - Have you ever couchsurfed with other couchsurfers from the DFW area?
- If so, how do these couchsurfing experiences differ from the ones away from home?
- Different safety, trust, etc. issues? – Have access to car, and can always go home, etc.

Concluding Questions
Q28 - Do you have any advice for people who are thinking about trying out couchsurfing for the first time?

Q29 - What is the most important thing you have learned from couchsurfing?

Q30 - Why do you think couchsurfing is as big as it is (3+ million)?
- Do you think it will continue to grow? and why?
- Do you think couchsurfing will ever go mainstream?
   - Are there any issues that may hinder this progress? (danger, safety, trust, etc.)

APPENDIX D

SUBJECT RECRUITMENT: EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Subject Recruitment – Email to Participants (CouchRequest)

Note: Since the CouchSurfing.org guidelines state that a person should not send out "copy and pasted" couchsurfing requests to multiple people, the researcher must add personalized information about myself, as well as the potential couchsurfer that I am attempting to contact. Therefore, the text below is a rough mockup of what will be emailed out to the potential participants depending on their couchsurfing experience (host, surfer, et cetera).

Hi [first name of potential participant],

My name is Rory, I'm a graduate student studying sociology at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA). I have just recently started a research project on couchsurfing, where I am looking to learn all about CouchSurfing.org (how it works, its purpose, etc.) and understand the motivations, expectations, and experiences of the people who participate in this community.

Right now, I am currently in the process of looking for volunteers to interview (or perhaps even couchsurf with!). In this interview, I will ask you all kinds of questions about your life and experiences throughout your journey into the world of couchsurfing. The interview should only take about an hour or so, but I would be pleased to talk with you for as much (or little) time as you have available and are willing.

 [add personalized information about potential couchsurfer here]

[If respondent is a *surfer*]: I can see from your profile that you are not currently open to hosting anyone at the moment, nonetheless I was wondering if you would still be interested in meeting up with me sometime and let me pick your brain a bit.

 [If a *host*]: I was just wondering if you would be available to host me in the next few weeks, my schedule is currently open for [date]. Since this is a research project that will focus on my own observations of our discussions and interactions during my stay with you, therefore I will be most likely taking some handwritten notes, and even audio-record our conversations and questions, during my stay with you for research purposes (as long as that is cool with you of course!). Even though this Couch Request may be a bit "different", I would still like you to treat me in the same manner as you would any other couchsurfer. :)

I am planning on [couchsurfing / conducting interviews] as much as possible for the next few months, so if right now isn't a good time, it might be possible to figure out a time that can work best for the both of us at a later date if necessary. Since I am currently only working on this couchsurfing project at the moment, I should be available to meet with you on just about any day of the week, or even on the weekends if that works best for you!

Please note: This project is completely independent and has no *official* connection to the CouchSurfing.org organization in any way. Also, your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Therefore you can quit this study at any time or even choose to skip any of my questions that you do not wish to answer (Just yell "no comment!"). To ensure your own privacy and confidentiality in this study, you will be completely *anonymous* (none of the

participants names will be revealed). Also everything we talk about during the interview [or during my time with you] will be kept as private as possible by limiting the number of revealing identifying characteristics about yourself (such as race, gender, age, etc.). To ensure this, UTA requires me to *formally* ask for permission to study you by informing you that you will need to sign an informed consent document prior to completing the interviews [and observations].

So if you are interested in participating, or you have any further questions or concerns, don't hesitate in emailing me back :)

Thanks,
Rory Bradbury

APPENDIX E

INFORMANT DEMOGRAPHICS TABLE

Alias	Gender	Age	Current Hosting Status	Preferred Role	Last Time Hosted/Surfed	CS Experience	# Hosted	# Surfed	Same Sex Preference*
Amber	Female	31	No	Surfer	1 Year	High	13	15	Yes
Betty	Female	62	Available	Host	2 month	Average	8	0	No
Catherine	Female	26	Maybe	Host	6 month	Average	2	1	No
Dan	Male	69	Available	Surfer	1 Year	Average	0	6	No
Ethan	Male	23	No	Surfer	2 Years	Low	2	0	No
Faye	Female	23	Available	Surfer	6 Months	High	1	17	No
Garrett	Male	29	Traveling	Host	2 weeks	High	35	11	No
Harriet	Female	35	Maybe	Surfer	3 month	High	7	4	No
Ian	Male	39	Available	Surfer	1 Year	Average	0	7	No
James	Male	48	Maybe	Host	2 month	Average	6	2	No
Kimberly	Female	30	No	Surfer	5 month	Average	0	5	Yes
Lacey	Female	27	Available	Host	3 Month	Average	4	5	No
Matt	Male	24	No	Surfer	2 Years	Average	0	5	No
Natalie	Female	23	Available	Surfer	10 Month	Low	0	1	No
Olivia	Female	31	Available	Host	1 Year	High	13	2	Yes
Paul	Male	32	Available	Host	1 Year	High	11	2	No
Harry & Maude	M & F	30	Available	Surfer	3 month	High	10	9	No
Rose	Female	24	Available	Host	2 Years	Low	4	2	Yes
Sam	Male	31	Available	Host	2 month	High	6	4	No

* - Out of everyone who selected they had a preference on the survey, no one disclosed this on their online profile.

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