Creative Travel

Study of Tourism from a socio-cultural point of view- The Case of CouchSurfing

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This thesis is an ethnographic study regarding one specific travel orientated online community. CouchSurfing community is a vast traveller’s network and I have aimed to make sense of how it functions as well as study the many different ways it is used by its members.

I have chosen few key elements witch play an important role within the network. Under particular interest have been concepts such as home, trust, strangers and collectiveness. This strange mix is at the heart of the community and I have discussed with members how they view the other community members in relations to the selected key concepts. Under questioning has also come the fact that CouchSurfing is a rather unique online community, hence it is put into use everyday in the real, offline world.

I will also discuss to some extend about history of tourism and travel as I aim to make comparisons between the more traditional tourist and Couchsurfers. I discuss why people choose CouchSurfing as they preferred travel method and what the experiences have been alike.

The methodological approach to the study is the combination of ethnography and auto-ethnography. I have been a member of this community for many years and because of that I have used my own experiences as a form of data. The primary data I have used has come from other members who I have been interviewing. Data has also been drawn from meetings, from the Internet site itself as well as from e-mails that other Couchsurfers have send for me. Mainly I have collected CouchSurfing stories; hence they best demonstrate how the interaction really occurs within the community. Therefore this piece reads like an ethnographic description regarding the community.

It seems that against all the odds CouchSurfing seems to work quite effortlessly. It appears to be a safe and valued community and the members have found many, unexpected ways to use if for their advantage. The CouchSurfing community has proven to be an excellent safe heaven for drifters and travellers of all sorts. It is a unique community, where the members have shown great respect towards other members and in many creative ways they have made exploring and travelling both safer and more interesting.

CouchSurfing is expanding in vast speed and the growth of the network will create problems regarding safety and more so it seems that many new members are not so actively involved with the community, which can harm the community spirit. It remains to be seen if CouchSurfing is just a passing phase and a social network that will flourish and eventually die out or whether it will something greater.
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PART ONE

1.0 Preface

“...And when I think of it, I guess it is true that people always arrive at the right moment at the place where someone awaits them. “

Paulo Coelho

I have always longed for adventures. In my dreams I have travelled far and beyond. The tastes, smells and sounds I have imagined have made my head spin and heart pound. Over and over again I have thought ways how to reach all the places that I desired for. I have not yet managed to “conquer the world” but I have found a tool and people who might just help me to fulfil some of my dreams. I have found CouchSurfing.

Let me take you few years back, preciously to the year 2005. It was the usual story. I had developed yet again itchy feet and ever growing desire to hit the road. However, once more I was completely broke. I had just about enough money to buy a return ticket to Hämeenlinna. A trip there would hardly cure my travel fever. Then, by accident I stumbled across a website that advertised that world had just gotten smaller and that I was invited to join the growing number of explorers. The realisation that there was thousands of people wanting to host travellers like me hit me into my face and the way I travel and experience new cultures was changed for good. After working for few months as a part time sales person I had saved enough money and my train ticket to Hämeenlinna changed into a month’s adventure across Europe. Since then I have hosted many travellers, and received a warm welcome from many hosts. Consequently I want to dig deeper and look for reasons why people invest their time and energy to CouchSurfing and I especially wish to find out why people still believe in the goodness of the others and take a risk by inviting strangers to their homes?

CouchSurfing, among other hospitality networks is a somewhat a new way to connect with the word around you. I now run my own “hotel” – free of charge of course and by opening my home to complete strangers I have met people whose stories have inspired and challenged me in many ways.
After deciding the topic of my thesis I was forced to question my own motives and reasons for travelling. It was important to understand myself and somehow define what kind of tourist/traveller I am. I tend to travel because I want to escape the everyday routines and when I am travelling I feel that I am truly alive. In the way I should have passed my rite of passage stage, but every time I pack my backpack and set out to the world I do search for personal growth and I somehow hope that travelling will in some way tell me what I want to do with my life. Travelling enables me to be part of the world, more intensively and more concretely. When using CouchSurfing as a tool when travelling, I can also be assured that I will meet interesting people while travelling, who will inspire me, help me and who are alike me.

Every now and then I have wondered why people enjoy travelling so much. It is hard work and at times it is intimidating to say the least. Long days in a strange environment where one does not know his/her way around, the language barrier and the looks from the locals stating “oh, no, another lost tourist blocking my way!” can be exhausting. In some ways CouchSurfing has taken some of the edge away from travelling, made it easier and more hassle free. CouchSurfing is all about meeting a friendly face at the train station or attending a house party with locals or having a tour guide who can take you to the best places. It is safety and excitement in a same package. Somebody commented on CouchSurfing as follows- “CS is much more than hosting or being hosted. It is even much more than cultural exchange. It is more about restoring faith in fellow human beings. It’s about the realization that even in this competitive environment human goodness still exists in the hearts of people and it just needs a spark to ignite it. As a by-product you learn patience and tolerance. You also get to know many interesting people and learn something new every time. CS is one of the best things which could have happened to mankind”.

2.0 Introduction

This thesis will discuss in what kind of ways one “online” community has changed the way people travel and experience unfamiliar places. Throughout the thesis I will discuss concepts such as identity, home, trusts, friendship and the notion of strangers in connection with travel.

History of tourism will also be touched in my thesis. I aim to make sense how CouchSurfing differs from other travelling styles and why it has become so popular among travellers. I will look up reasons and motivations to travel as well as the reasons why people are so keen to expand their cultural space and create an aura of a cosmopolitan feel.

I will begin by introducing CouchSurfing. I will explain the aims and purposes of the project as well as demonstrate how the community functions. Throughout the text I aim to deepen the readers understanding of the phenomena. Networks such as CouchSurfing challenge notions of traditional tourism and I believe that the behaviour and the actions of tourist and travellers differ greatly from those of Couchsurfers. As Nash argues that tourist often only want to enjoy themselves, and they rarely gain more that superficial acquaintance with the natives, who in return are not very much interested in knowing the tourist (Nash; 1996; 26). This approach seems very alien to Couchsurfers. Traditionally tourism has been organised around mass mobility in a safe, controlled environment (with a hint of authenticity). Couchsurfers however resist these tourist experiences, which are argued to be predictable, efficient, calculated and controlled. I shall discuss with my interviewees on their travel experiences as well as collect stories that tell me how they travel when using CouchSurfing and view in more detail whatever themes come under discussion with my interviewees.

I will aim to discuss with the surfers I get to meet why they value the community and why they are willing to invest so much on complete strangers. I will also observe myself as a member of the community and discuss about my experiences and feelings in relation to the community and other surfers. Next I try to outline my aims and objectives in more detail.
2.1 Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is by using qualitative research methods to show how CouchSurfing functions as a post-modern online community and how concepts such as home and strangers are combined within the community. I intend to find out how the community functions by studying the website and interviewing the members. I plan to find out how much the community members invest in the community and on the relationships created via the network and more precisely why they do it? Upon completion of this thesis I aim to demonstrate that CouchSurfing is a living, changing and vigorous community. I anticipate acquiring skills to understand the phenomenon in more detail and provide in ethnographical tradition a detailed study of the community.

My main interest throughout this study has been the rather unique connection between the concept of strangers and home; hence that connection makes this community rather exceptional. One of the key objectives is to identify what the concept home means to surfers and how they connect kinship and hospitality with home. The main aim therefore is to study how these concepts function within the sphere of CouchSurfing while building an ethnographic description of the community itself.

Outside the core questions I will also discuss what the reasons why people have joined the community were. I will also aim to determine what provokes fascination for other places and (Foreign people). My goal is to determine how CouchSurfing generally fits within the existing tourist discourse. I’m also particularly interested in how intimately the people are involved with the network and has it brought significant changes on their everyday lives. In ethnographic fashion I have also collected detailed accounts regarding surfers travel experiences, since they demonstrate in the best possible way how the community functions and operates in practice.
**3.0 CouchSurfing**

Tourism has become a popular area for empirical investigation. It can be approached from various angles and in the recent years social science disciplines such as sociology and social anthropology have shown great interest in the analysis of tourism. However, until recently, studies in tourism have focused mainly on the marketing, rather than to the actual tourist experience (Tom Selwyn; 1996, 4). It is this experience, which I will consider in my research, focusing in particular on the Internet community called CouchSurfing.

John Urry, one of the most noted researchers in the field of tourism wrote in his book *Sociology beyond Societies* that “The Internet is a curious new kind of social-technical phenomenon that is formless, chaotic, changing and unpredictable” (Urry; 2000; 70). Internet has indeed created extensive, intricate transnational social networks. However, most of the networks exist merely in the Cyberspace. Those networks appear to be faceless, tasteless and noiseless. Nevertheless, there are communities that exist both in the cyberspace and in the real world. CouchSurfing offers a great example on how community can function both on and off-line.

CouchSurfing is an Internet based hospitality service that seeks to connect travellers across the globe. It is the largest hospitality exchange network, other major players being BeWelcome, Global Freeloaders, Hospitality club, Place2Stay, Servas, and Stay4Free. CouchSurfing International is a non-profit company and the site is free to all members, supported only with donations and verifications. CouchSurfing was launched in beta on January, 2003 and it became a public website in January 2004.

Through the CouchSurfing network members can benefit from each others hospitality as well as exchange skills, knowledge and advice on travelling. The key function of the site is simply to connect likeminded, travel orientated people throughout the world. CouchSurfing works as a channel between people, through which some find a place to sleep and others find company to share a cup of coffee with, in a strange city. It is a form of a gift economy where hospitality, honesty and open mind acts as the currency.

The founder of the site, Casey Fenton, describes his creation as follows; “CouchSurfing is not about the furniture, not just about finding free accommodations around the world; it is about making
connection worldwide. We make a world a better place by opening our homes, our hearts and our lives. We open our minds and welcome the knowledge that cultural exchange makes available. We create deep and meaningful connections that cross oceans, continents and cultures. CouchSurfing wants to change not only the way we travel, but how we relate to the world”.

To best sum up CouchSurfing project is the mission statement that can be found on the website, www.couchsurfing.com. The aim of the project in a nutshell is “To internationally network people and places, create educational exchanges, raise collective consciousness, spread tolerance and facilitate cultural understanding”.

CouchSurfing network is vast and versatile. There is approximately 1, 4 million surfers worldwide¹ and the numbers are growing rapidly. The statistics state that 1000-2000 surfers join the network every week. Couchsurfers can be found approximately in 220 countries in total and all age groups are well presented, the youngest "official" surfer being 18 years and the oldest 89 years old. The Site offers various statistics so that surfers can follow how many successful “surfings” have occurred so far and how many friendships have been created through the site. Information on countries and languages, most popular regions and cities are also well presented.

To become a member one has to create a profile, add it to the CouchSurfing database and once that is completed it is possible to go and surf or host fellow travellers that are in your region. The more detailed the user profile is, the easier it is to find surfers that have similar interest. This is important since often the decision whether to host a surfer or not is based on the information provided in the profile. Many list their favourite bands, films and authors, since they often provide an excellent topic for a conversation. The creators of the site also welcome surfers to share their personal philosophy, goals in life as well as tell about their most amazing experience so far. Dan, one of the founders of the website, explained that the profile questions are structured in such a way that —it brings out the essence of people. The more people tell about themselves the easier it is to decide whether the person is someone who you would like to invite to your home or indeed someone who you would like to go and visit.

One of the interesting and popular features in the site is groups, which anyone can create or join according their interests, believes and hobbies. This is an enjoyable and good way to interact and

¹ 20.09.2009
get to know other surfers. In the groups one can discuss hobbies, politics, sexual orientations and problems that they have encountered when travelling. In some groups people are searching someone to travel with or company to hitch a ride from city to another. Some groups are more light-hearted.

As an example I could give a group that calls itself “The holy church of Lasagne” where surfers exchange lasagne recipes’ and even invite each others to come and test their version of the dish. There is a constant search for liked minded people taking place inside the community. Friendships are created daily via the website and eventually many decide to travel across the world to see these people that they have met on the site. Friendships are often based on the profiles and discussions that have taken place on the chat or groups, not on proximity or place.

It can be a very rich and rewarding way of travelling and this is one of the main reasons why I personally prefer CouchSurfing to traditional backpacking. Besides this I am interested to study the phenomenon that creates global communities and networks while offering its users an opportunity to explore the world. I joined the network in April 2005 and it has without a doubt had an impact on my life. It has brought me together with some remarkable people and it has allowed me to experience places in a completely different way. For me and I dare to argue for many it simply is a way of life. Once joining in I received a very warm welcome from one of the ambassadors stating; “Hi there Piia! I want to thank you for signing up on CouchSurfing, its great to have you here. As I can see you already filled up your profile, which is great. Personalizing your profile by adding a photo or by filling up some info’s on yourself makes it easier for people to find interesting couches to surf on! I hope you enjoy being part of this community and if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or any other CouchSurfing ambassador. Once again, welcome abroad! A simple e-mail made me feel very welcomed and it managed to build up a feeling of excitement that has not disappeared to this day. I will predict that many of my fellow surfers feel just like I do. On board there are also volunteers, who e-mail to new couchsurfers and offer them help or just welcome new members to the network by saying hello or even by inviting them surf their couch.

Personal interaction with people in different places is a key concept when describing CouchSurfing. The purpose of the project is simply to allow travellers” to experience a slice of local life across the globe”. A couchsurfers does not only drink local wine, he or she wants to experience how it is been made, a couchsurfer does not want to gaze at the parades and fiestas; they want to take part in one. The driving force behind CouchSurfing is the fact that when surfing one can experience the place with the locals instead of with fellow travellers and tourists.
CouchSurfing appears to be a community that practices raw idealism and at times it feels that the whole thing is getting out of hand. Every week anything up to 2000 new surfers register, many with poor profiles stating they are not willing to host. When the idea is to share and some just aim to take advantage of the system without giving anything back some of the existing surfers have shown concerns if the level of trust suffers from this. The whole site is basically built on peoples trust and goodwill. When someone violates one surfer he or she abuses the whole system and all of the members. The founders have also created something that could be seen as a code of conduct. Surfers have been given guidelines how to act and behave when surfing. Respect towards your host is obviously the key to successful surfing. It is also recommended to pay great deal of attention to cultural differences. Offending or violating customs can lead into a failed surfing and leave the host feeling betrayed or offended. Communication skills are vital when surfing. Discussing on plans and timetables is important and the guest should be as flexible as possible. Surfing is always done in the terms of the host. Many hosts aim to adjust their timetable and daily routines when hosting and if the surfer keeps changing dates and times it can be considered highly disrespectful towards the host. The system is based on references and the administration encourages suffers to leave accurate references, even negative ones. This is one way of keeping the network as safe as possible and it also helps to eliminate risks.

The administration has aimed to set some form of rules on how to use the site and how to behave whilst surfing, but unfortunately there are participants who abuse the system. Some also mistake the system for a dating site and many girls receive spam daily, with indecent proposals. At times someone suggests a marriage in order to gain a visa. These are problems that occur on most internet sites, but they do harm the image of the site. Some action has been taken in order to reduce the abuse and the organisation has taken zero-tolerance policy when it comes to sexual harassment. The administration is known to send warnings on sufferers who have abused their host in any way and those who are caught sending spam are dismissed from the network.

Many wonder how the system can be safe and why so many have chosen to open their homes to complete strangers. No system can be bullet-proof but measures have been taken in order to guarantee the safety of the surfers. Not just everyone can become vouched for or verified member of the community. All new potential members can only become vouched for if an existent member who has been vouched three times decides to vouch for him or her. References and the list of friends appear on suffers profile and by reading them one can get an idea if the surfer is trustworthy.
Usually these are left by members who have actually met each others. It could be seen as a trust circle.

The site is constantly being updated and new features are being added in order to make it more user-friendly. The site is constructed solely by volunteers. The goal is to make the site accessible for as many as possible. Currently volunteers are aiming to translate the site to various languages. This will open the network for those who do not use English as their first language. At the moment the site is available in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and German. Volunteers across the world work on translating the site into their native languages, one of the languages being Finnish.

CouchSurfing organisation should be as simple and intuitive to all nationalities, age ranges and technical levels as possible. Tourism has always been labelled as elitist and CouchSurfing is aiming to change this notion and provide people the means to see world regarding their social status. Having active members from over 220 countries demonstrates that the project may just change the field of “tourism” for real. One of the latest features is that people are asked to show on their profile if their home is accessible by wheelchair. To me, this small gesture shows how committed the founders are in making the site accessible and usable for everyone since the whole idea of the project is that it does not discriminate anyone. What one must understand that in order to use CouchSurfing one does not have to travel hundreds of miles, since many use hosts even in their own country. Hence, it is accessible to most if not all of us. The imagination of the surfer sets up the boundaries on how he/she decides to use the network.

One important feature in CouchSurfing indeed is the fact that people can decide how much they want to be involved with it. Some just join the site and forget it soon after doing so, some use it on regular bases and some have made it to their life mission to make it work. Official collective gatherings and meetings take place frequently and recently the site has supported special projects. One of the most followed projects is called “War on them”. Two American soldiers, who have recently returned from Iraq have decided to couchsurf around the world and promote peace and cross-cultural connections. Suffers across the globe follow their video diary weekly and hundreds have invited them to visit their home. Furthermore the users write their own wikipedia on various different topics. The wikipedia is open for all surfers to edit and write to. Surfers use the wikipedia as a tool to inform and help other surfers. The knowledge exchanged often deals with safety issues as well as tips on different locations. Another important feature is the CouchSurfing collectives that have been held since 2006. They can last anything from few days to weeks during which the site is
being developed and improved. So far collectives have been held in Montreal, Vienna, New Zealand, Thailand and Alaska.

The project is cherished by many and several people have adapted it as their way of life. The events of summer 2006 illustrate just how important CouchSurfing is to its users. In June 2006 the project suffered a terrible blow. The hard-drive crashed during maintenance and the site was forced to shut down. The founder of the project, Casey Fenton soon posted an announcement were he poured his heart out and explained to thousands that this was the end and that CouchSurfing no longer existed. However, the CouchSurfing community refused to accept that their beloved community was shattered for good. The rescue process started within few minutes after the announcement. Suffers across the world came together via various channels- Messageboards were set up so that surfers could try to locate their hosts again and for those who were stranded on the road many instantly offered a place to sleep. A CouchSurfing "refugee online camp" was created, technical knowledge and advice was offered so that people could take part in rescuing as much as data as possible and surfers located in same areas met up to discuss how the project can be put back on-line and how best to help surfers who have lost their hosts. Parcels, letters and money poured into CouchSurfing headquarter all containing a request;” Please, "do not give up!” The administration team in Montreal realized that CouchSurfing is more than just the data and that the people are the true heart of the project and that they were more alive than ever. Within no time, a new, improved CouchSurfing version 2.0 was launched. This demonstrates how powerful the CouchSurfing community actually is and more than this it proves that Internet has changed fundamentally the ways people travel and that the connections created online are real and not just some random encounters outside cyberspace. Nomads, travellers, pilgrimages’ and adventures of all kind gather under one roof and make meaningful connections across the world.

The media has also started to pay attention to the site. Such giants as The Sunday Times and New York Times, among others, have run a feature on CouchSurfing. Most of the articles have sung praises for the site and people in travel business are staring to get nervous. For example in Paris, some of the local hotel owners have been woken up by these articles. They are aiming to ban CouchSurfing within the city because they worry it will do great damage to their business. Paris is the third most popular location among the couchsurfers and hotel owner’s reaction shows that CouchSurfing certainly is challenging the tourism as we know it.
I believe that many still claim that real communities are built through common, shared experience by people who live in the same locality and communities in cyberspace can’t support this notion. However, CouchSurfing aims that communication via the network would lead to a real human connection and ultimately to connection in the real world and this shows that it is not merely just an ordinary Internet based community, but truly a living organ. Internet has turned out to be a valuable tool for millions and the way CouchSurfing has utilised it is quite remarkable. Consequently, one can argue that television was a means for transportation for the mind whereas Internet has offered transportation for both, the body and mind.

Bauman has made a note of the solidarity within explorers, “While we all, singly or collectively, are embarked on the search of best form of humanity, since we all wish eventually to avail ourselves of it, each of us explorers a different avenue and brings from the expedition somewhat different findings” (Bauman; 2002; 101). CouchSurfing, more than anything shows solidarity to explorers. It helps people to find help, advice and shelter even when on the roads less travelled. It encourages people to fulfil their dreams and occasionally to take a “walk on the wild-side”.
4.0 Methodology

In this chapter I introduce the key research methods I have used within this research whilst discussing them in relation to CouchSurfing. The key methods are ethnography and participant observation, autoethnography and internet ethnography. All methods are widely used within the sphere of social anthropology.

4.1 Ethnography

Traditionally, when conducting ethnography researcher has to negotiate his or hers access to the field. My chosen community, hence my field, was introduced to me by a radio programme that was aired on YLEX. On the afternoon show in April 2005 group of people told about their unusual travels habits. Discussions varied from auto rental service which encourages its customers to drive to old Soviet countries with their rental vehicles to a girl who talked about internet service where one can find free accommodation when travelling. Quickly after the show I located CouchSurfing site from the web. For hours I studied the site and admired the open-mindedness and courage of the members. However it took me a good few weeks to actually register myself as a surfer. I felt I that I needed to consider carefully whether to sign up or not. Finally my curiosity won and I logged on. In ethnographical terms I had been my own gatekeeper and the gate was opened when I opened my mind.

To put ethnography as it simplest one can borrow Agar ´s interpretation. He says that ethnographer “wants to find out what one group thinks and does” (Agar; 23; 1980). van Maanen states that “in case of ethnography, what we continue to look for is the close study of culture as lived by particular people, in particular places, doing particular things at particular times” ( van Maanen; 23; 1995). Hence, I am studying few members more intimately while also drawing data from the website itself.

Research always begins with some problem or set of issues. I my case, I would say that I have issues that I wish to make sense of in relation to CouchSurfing. As Hammersley states ; "Most ethnographic research has been concerned with producing descriptions and explanations of particular phenomena, or with developing theories, rather than with testing existing hypotheses “ (Hammersley; 2001; 25). CouchSurfing was for me something new, something different and I decided that I will try to understand it in a wider context.
Ethnographies are certainly interpretations from somebody’s point of view. The researcher has to state his/ her intentions so as to position himself/ herself and his/ her intentions for others to be able to assess the plausibility or the reliability of her results. As Hannerz argues, there are a growing number of ethnographies of transnational communities, transnational networks and transnational kinship groupings (Hannerz; 1996; 98). Hence it is very timely topic to study CouchSurfing, since it seems to be all of the above. My purpose is to try and understand what CouchSurfing means to those who are actively engaged in it; I will interpret how CouchSurfing community functions both on and off-line. I have collect data via interviews as well as from group meetings, given that I am interested in the experiences, opinions and feelings of the Couchsurfers. The research will aim to map out why people become enthusiastic about CouchSurfing and on what motivated them to join it in the first place. Since ethnography can be seen as a form of a storytelling, I have met couchsurfers in their homes or bars and I have asked them to tell me their stories. In brief I have aimed to collect their history as couchsurfers. They have told me about their adventures, travels and friendships they have created through the CouchSurfing network. They have also showed me photographs from their travels. From these stories I have then build one possible picture of CouchSurfing.

The reason I chose open-ended interviews was because I wanted to understand and capture the points of view of each respondent. At times I directed the interviews so that the issues that I’m interested came under discussion. Most of the times I let my interviewees to ramble and I encouraged them to tell me more (stories). I wanted to collect a sample of life stories that document how multidimensional and full of variety CouchSurfing actually is.

I have done eight interviews. Each interview has lasted approximately two to three hours. I have recorded each interview which I have then written them out and searched for re-occurring themes. Some have approached me via e-mails; in my profile I have asked people to send me their CouchSurfing stories and I have posted in different groups an invitation that asks surfers to share their CouchSurfing moments with me. Also a questionnaire has been circulated on the site. However, this was not as fruitful as first anticipated and the data collected this way was indeed very poor.

Participant observation is widely used when conducting an ethnographic piece. As Hammersley explains ethnographer participates in people’s lives for a period of time, while observing what happens, listening what is been said and in fact collecting any form of material that could shed a light to the research (Hammersley; 2003, 1). I have collected this material in a way ever since I first
joined the community, either when surfing or hosting or when participating one of the many meetings I have attended as well as when interviewing people for this study. Interviewing people seemed particularly easy. They all seemed very relaxed and easygoing, and it definitely helped that I was a member of the community we were discussing. Building rapport was important when conducting these interviews, without that the picture can become distorted. In this case, the relationship was kind of already there, even when we personally did not know each others. Conversation flow freely and we both seemed at ease with one and other. Observing this particular community has been relatively easy; the community members have been talkative, friendly and very open and I have no doubt in my mind that they have been outmost honest with me.

When attending meetings I have not made a number out of the fact that I am researching the CouchSurfing community and it has been simple enough for me to just observe and listen to the surfers who I have not previously met.

4.2 Autoethnography

One of the members who I have studied more closely is I. Autoethnography is literally, the creation of an ethnography focused on the self. The author is both informant and investigator. It has not been easy; the matters of voice have grown complicated whilst writing this. While it is an autobiographic genre of writing, the autoethnography is not simply a personal narrative. It is about interpreting his/her’s own actions, thoughts and behaviour. Throughout the text my voice can be heard since I am writing both my own history as a Couchsurfer and my encounters with other Couchsurfers can be understood through the prism of my own entry to the field. Many (Sparkes, Coffey, Denzin) have questioned autoethnography as a source of data. They claim that it is self-indulgent and narcissistic. It may be so, but I believe that personalized accounts where the author draws from his or hers own experiences can be rewarding and help others to understand a particular phenomenon or culture. Moreover, my purpose is not to analyse my experiences per se, but to take my experiences as the standpoint from which I have learned about important features of CouchSurfing.

I have been in the field since July 2005. However, I never knew that I would be writing an ethnographic piece on CouchSurfing when I first started surfing. Luckily I have always kept diary almost religiously when I’m on the road and I have a possibility to use them as a form of field notes. Hence, this piece occasionally reads almost like a side product of my own life
However it is completely different story when I’m hosting surfers. It is difficult to write field notes when I am living my life – in my own home, where nothing at first glimpse seen neither extraordinary nor exiting. My guests are my friends and entertaining them is time consuming, finding time and energy to write notes is hard and in ways strolling up and down the streets of Tampere is hard to view as scientific data. However I have written accounts on what has happened when I have hosted surfers in my diary. Also, I have written about my emotions and feelings in order to capture what the experience was like.

In a way I am in the centre of this piece of work and my own voice can be heard throughout it. There is no denying the fact that my own experiences shape considerably the interpretations of the whole phenomenon. I have occasionally struggled with my various roles. Being a researcher, informant, writer and interviewer turned out to be complicated. However, I wanted to give myself voice too because I am a member of CouchSurfing and it has somewhat changed my life as it seems to have done so to many other as well. Being part of it has helped me to understand it better and my own insight to the topic can therefore be seen as important data. To conclude one could ague that to understand a strange society, the anthropologist has to immerse himself in it, learning, as far as possible, to think, see, feel and sometimes act as a member of its culture. In my case, in order to understand the phenomenon, I, myself have to be a couchsurfer.

4.3 Internet ethnography

CouchSurfing is a new phenomenon that I wish to understand. In this day and age, when people are maybe more selfish and introverted than ever it is exiting to find out what makes thousands of people to trust strangers and what makes people to welcome Otherness into their homes with open arms. Otherness is researched vastly in modern sociological studies, most notably by Sarah Ahmed and I believe that to study otherness is important study subject even when my approach is rather different. For me producing new knowledge requires deep understanding of the existing research so that I can challenge the existing theories as well as provide new approach. CouchSurfing or in fact no Internet based "travel community" has not been studied to a deep extend and I am excited to embark on to this journey. The topic is timely, since Internet has changed the way we communicate and evidently even the way we travel. Most likely it will continue to do so in years to come.
The new technologies play a large role in our everyday lives. As Hine suggests technological developments have a far reaching cultural implications for the lived experience of space and time. Internet has enlarged our possibilities of building our social relations across time and space (Hine; 2000, 6). Hence, for many the boundary between virtual and real experiences has become blurred. For example CouchSurfing site is a social place, witch shapes our social relations and where strong, intimate relations are build every day. Miller argues that; “many experience websites as comparatively concrete and mundane enactments of belonging, rather that as virtual” (Miller; 2001; 7). Hence, these places (websites) are an important part of everyday life. They help us to define who we are and who we are not.

For these reasons the data for the research is been collected by using various methods and a wide range of sources. By using these methods I believe that I have in my use the tools that allow me to focus upon values, rituals and general patterns of behaviour underlying social relations within the CouchSurfing network.
5.0 Key Concepts and Previous Research

In this chapter I will introduce key concepts and existing theories which are central in my study. I will begin with research in relation to traditional community and continue to theories in relations to internet communities while then aiming to theorize how CouchSurfing can be seen both as a traditional community as well as post-modern Internet community. After that I will tackle the history of tourism and show how it has and is changing. Finally I will define home and the notion of strangers, hence those concepts are in the core of my research.

5.1 Community

“Community is a ‘warm’ place, a cosy and comfortable place. It is like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace at which we warm our hands on a frosty day. “

Zygmunt Bauman

Community has always had a vast importance in human history. Throughout the times humans have embraced the idea of community. Desire for belonging, sense of security and search for companionship are the driving forces when thinking why individuals seek communities so intensively. The common values create basis of the community. Those values give members meaning and perspective to view the world. The search for collective identity and solidarity is therefore never ending. Communities tend to have variable meanings and they are not always bound to a specific place or time. We belong to local, global and virtual communities and act within them in very different ways. One can take an active role; others decide to stay at the backseat and at times due to the peer pressure we find ourselves involved within a community that we might not embrace as ours.

Community is a symbolic structure. David Potter states that “Community seems to refer primarily to relations of commonality between persons and objects, and only rather imprecisely to the site of such community. What is important is a holding-in-common of qualities, properties, identities and ideas” (Potter; 1997; 8). I guess CouchSurfing is mostly offering collective humanity and creative
imagination and it exists in various locations and minds simultaneously. Community after all is all about the sense of belonging.

Delanty states, “From the late nineteenth century new debate about communities emerged. With the rise of sociology and anthropology, community began to be conceived in terms of cultural community rather than a political ideal” (Delanty; 2003; 28). The idea of community was now bound to society rather than to the state and what we now consider as communities started to emerge from everywhere. For example when Tönnies argued that community as Gemeinschaft was something that could be found in rural villages and in town regions, these new communities, Gesellschafts existed in cosmopolitan life in public opinion (Delanty; 2003; 33). Hence it could be travelling, or for example alcoholism or something like movies that would bring people together in that communal spirit. We as individuals were and are allowed to belong independently to various communities regarding our needs and desires. Delanty argues that “community no longer is a compelling moral structure that determines behaviour but it is a resource from which people may draw” (2003, 47).

Forms of communities have changed over the time. The rural, genuine communities have been somewhat placed by dispersed friendship networks, activity and belief based elected communities, imagined communities or virtual communities. In sum, one could argue that community has and is an important basis of much of modern social relationships. Strong communities nowadays can also be found online and as Porter argues that that the best virtual community is an extension of a “real community” (Potter; 1997; 7) CouchSurfing as a community fills this criterion quite easily.

5.2 Internet communities

Some of the major social and cultural transformations in the world today are having a vast impact on the idea of community. Sociology and cultural studies in particular have embraced the opportunities that have risen since the arrival of the Internet. However some fear that the Internet has damaged severely the meaning of community. It has left people with weak, transitory relationships instead of close, strong intimate ties that traditional communities create. Many claim that contact with “real life” has suffered extensively since communication has shifted from face-to-face communications to random encounters online. Robert Putnam has studied communities in great depth in his book Bowling Alone and he for one supports fully the importance of internet
communities. Putnam states, “At its best, computer mediated communication allows wider, more efficient networks that strengthen our ties to the social world and increase our intellectual capital. People with different pieces of the puzzle can collaborate more easily. Computer mediated communications can support large, dense and yet fluid groups that cut across existing organizational and geographic boundaries, increasing the involvement of otherwise peripheral participants” (Putnam; 2000, 172).

Internet communities differ greatly from traditional communities and there is a constant debate whether they should be called communities at all. Delanty states, “Whether these communicative moments constitute communities is hard to say and a lot depends on what is meant by the term community “ (Delanty; 2003, 168). One could argue that it is unhealthy to use the term community regarding mere online discussions-groups. Internet supported communication to many reads as a deceitful replacement and as untrue replicas of real forms of communication. Rheingold believes that in order to make an online community work at least some of the people must reach out through the screen and affect each others lives (Rheingold in Turkle; 1996; 246).

Rheingold inveted the term virtual communities and he states that these communities form when people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling whilts aiming to form webs of personal relationships (1993; 42). Others prefer the term Computer Supported Social Networks (Wellman, Gulia) which supports the notion of CouchSurfing quite well. Wellman and Gulia have also concluded that online communities meet reasonable definitions of community and that they are not artificial substitutes for more traditional forms of community (1999; 17). I suppose no one can disagree with the fact that Internet has provided new possibilities for communities to exist and function and virtual worlds are vastly getting populated. Silverman introduces a new way to view internet. He believes that “People tent to experience the internet in distinctive ways. Some conceptualize the internet as only a tool, while others perceived it as a place. Still others experience the internet as a way of being in the world” (2004, 98). Many are still looking for their place in the cyberspace. Communities in cyberspace differ greatly of those more traditional communities. I will now look more closely ways how CouchSurfing reads as a community.
5.3 CouchSurfing network as a community

“Do you want security? Give up your freedom or at least a good chunk of it. Do you want confidence? Do not trust anyone outside your community. Do you want mutual understanding? Don’t speak to foreigners nor use foreign languages. Do you want this cosy home feeling? Fix alarms on you door and TV cameras on your drive. Do you want safety? Do not let strangers in and yourself abstain from acting strangely and thinking odd thoughts. Do you want warmth? Do not come near the window, and never open one.”

Zygmunt Bauman

Bauman paints a cynical and somewhat horrifying image of community. Let’s imagine that community should read as describes above and one would immediately see that CouchSurfing could never gain a status of a community. However, the nature of community is changing and as many people now switch routinely between a nations and even languages then why not within communities that stretch further than their intimate surroundings.

In many ways such classics as *The Time of the Tribes* by Maffesoli and *Imagined Communities* by Anderson support my notion that CouchSurfing network meets the criterion of a community. CouchSurfing is not a very tight knitted community and it almost reads like Andersons imagined community. Anderson states that community is imagined because the members of nations or even some communities will never know most of their fellow members or either meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each individual they stand for as a united community (Anderson; 2006; 5). New technologies are partly allowing people to imagine themselves as similar to others, hence creating communities that differ from direct relationships. As Appadurai argues “Through globalizing uses of media technology, the balance between lived experience and imagination may have shifted” (Appadurai; 1991; 198) and so has our understanding of communities in which we can be members of. I feel that I am in some ways connected to each and every surfer there is but I will never have the possibility to meet them all. In a way CouchSurfing is a form of a neo-tribe where our shared lifestyle and values link us together but we do not own anything to each others. Delanty states “the whole point of Anderson ’s study was to show that community is shaped by cognitive and symbolic structures that are not underpinned by “ lived” spaces and immediate forms of social intimacy” (2003; 3). Maffesoli states that neo-tribalism is characterized by fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal. The tribes are unstable, since the members are free to move
from one tribe to another, particularly in the cyberspace (Maffesoli; 1996; 6). Modern cyber clubs all have partially overlapping members.

Conversely CouchSurfing is an exclusive community. It is elitist for two reasons. First of all, travelling has always been a privilege of the few chosen ones. Secondly, the community exists online and those who have access to the network have been closely selected by ethnicity, class, gender and nationality. David Morley states that “there is not much diversity in cyberspace. It is largely populated by white males under 50 with plenty of computer terminal time” (2000, 186). The lack of computers, knowledge demanded by the technology and language skills will for years to come exclude people from CouchSurfing community. There has been an ongoing discussion on the matter that even when the community “advertises” itself as a truly diverse community many members feel that CS is elitist and exclusive community. Many worry on what basis hosts are selected and whether community members are prejudice and they are disappointed to the community. In a way there seems to be every man for himself mentality and some are fighting to change this. There are individuals who believe that CouchSurfing is not promoting equal opportunities and radical changes must be done so that more people can access the network.

Vast bulk (82.2%) of Couchsurfers is from Europe, North America or Oceania including all the founders. Not saying this is a ‘bad’ thing (certainly it doesn’t matter where the founders came from), but it suggests that CouchSurfing can be seen largely as a Western concept, even though members can be found in over 220 countries. The figures certainly reflects the socio-economic situation of the globe and it shows that the network has a long way ahead of it before travelling is something other than a privilege of the chosen few.

Many question whether Internet sites can truly create new communities or are they simply enabling casual connections across cyberspace? Many wonder if strong, intimate ties can be created and maintained online. Testimonial gathered from the website prove that within CouchSurfing community they are and I for one can say that I truly care about (some of) the people I have met through the network. I wish to believe that Computer mediated communications will turn out to compliment, not replace face- face communication. CouchSurfing supports fully this notion, since community members can be active both on and off-line.

Delanty states that no discussion on community can avoid the question of multiculturalism. Like I have stated before CouchSurfing community has active members from over 200 countries. In
CouchSurfing the emphasis is on those social features which join people rather than on those which divide. Communities among travellers are not a recent phenomenon. Veijola has studied communities among tourists and travellers for years. Communities form in hostels, mountain huts and even in bars that are popular among backpackers. The difference is that CouchSurfing communities can appear anywhere, even at home and they can still be seen a travellers network/community.

Use of spaces, even when virtual, should be encouraged if it supports one’s identity and increases the sense of belonging and togetherness. One way of looking the impact of the internet is Turkle’s view that “Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life” (Turkle; 1996; 180). Transnational connections for one have an effect on the relationships that we have. Cooley has identified that we have two kinds of relationships- primary and secondary. He claims “Primary relationships link whole persons and secondary relationships merely enactors of specific roles” (Cooley in Hannerz; 1996; 95). I have claimed that relationships I have created via CS are real; most of them are only present when I have the role of the host or guest. When meeting new surfer’s connections and friends made via CS are present and primary, they serve as an important topic for discussion and as a link to the whole community. No close personal links may ever be formed wholly through the use of new technology, but it can help create them and more so it can do a great deal to maintain them across great distances. Computer mediated communications have turned out to compliment instead of replacing face-face communication. Alternative identities and playful relationships are born online daily and it is here where CouchSurfing demonstrated its uniqueness. We are all who we claim to be and we take the relationships and connection created via the network very seriously, since if we did not do so the community could not function.

Computer mediated communication is good for sharing information, gathering opinions and on having debates, but building trust and goodwill is not easy in cyberspace. CouchSurfing has managed in this difficult task quite well. There seems to be enormous trust between members. However, as stated earlier the networks keeps expanding in enormous speed and many long-term couchsurfers now offer their couch exclusively to members who have been verified or vouched for. Good references from another community member can be used to build up more connections. I believe that most members search sense of security that is spiced up with excitement within the community.
However what makes the community interesting and different from many other communities is the fact that it is not based on a common language, history or even culture. The community exist without a one, specific permanent location. Instead it exists in various locations simultaneously- and more so it manifests itself differently to every user.

5.4 Anthropology of tourism

Tourism is evidently a multi-dimensional phenomenon; it would be senseless to search for the typology of tourists as it is senseless to talk about a typical tourist. McCannell who is one of the most noted researchers in the filed of tourism claims that all tourists desire deeper involvement with society and culture to some degree. It is a basic component to their motivation to travel (McCannell in Suvantola; 2002; 53). It is the ways we travel and the objects of our desire that differ and set us apart. Researchers have identified different types of travellers- Organized mass tourist, individual mass tourist, explorers and drifters are the usual categories but one could also use the scale created by Lowyck. He has identified eight different tourist types. They are venturesome, pleasure-seeking, impassive, self-confident, planful, masculine, intellectual and people oriented tourist (Lowyck in Suvantola; 2002; 63). These sharp distinctions create a sense of elitism and ego-enhancement; it seems that travellers seek for superiority. Individualism seems to flower among tourist; people want experiences that portray their personality, experiences that in a way are superior to those of others. Travellers particularly wish to distinguish themselves from mass-tourism, which is counted as middle-class. However, most travellers tend to visit the same places which acts as evidence of how commonly shared the conventions of the tourist discourse are. Therefore the emphasis is on how one travels instead of the destination.

As said before travelling can at times be intimidating. Suvantola states that the key concern for a traveller is to find ways how to manage in the strange, maybe even perceivably hostile place, when there is no sufficient backing from the familiar elements of the tourist space (Suvantola; 2002; 202). Organised mass tourism differs greatly from backpacking. Suvantola points out that “the role of the travel industry here is to maintain tourist space so that when the tourist realise they can safely act within it, the initial insecurity dissolves and obliviousness can become replaced by watching and noticing. The tourist space is the metaworld that allows the escape from the confusion” (Suvantola; 2002; 203). Hence holiday destinations across Spain, Turkey and Greece
have for example karaoke bars where one can sing Finnish classics while eating more or less traditional Finnish food.

Tourist discourse paints diverse images. Couchsurfers seem to aim to brake away from traditional norms and ideas of tourism and in a sense even away from the idea of travelling. The way people move, the way we shift space, the way we push and explore the boundaries between “us,” the tourists and “them,” the native citizens, has become a fascinating and quickly changing phenomenon. While some locals on popular holiday destinations aim to learn basic use of the languages used by the tourists others aim to stay away from the herds of tourists. Because CouchSurfing is not a paid experince it clearly is more autentic one. Ritzer has discussed to a large extend about the McDonaldisation of the society and he has also argued that the tourims industry relies heavily on the products and services witch are familiar and safe (Ritzer; 2004; 73). Hence the tourist environment is designed to look and feel similar to home.Unfortunately the tourist and travelers often do not help the local economy at all when they spend most of their travel funds in multicultural shops and restaurants nearby the hotel location.

I would also like to discuss the term cosmopolitan within relation to travellers. Hannerz describes cosmopolitans as follows; “Genuine cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with Other. It entails an intellectual and esthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrast rather than uniformity. To become acquainted with more cultures, is to turn into an aficionado, to view them as artworks. At the same time, however, cosmopolitanism can be a matter of competence, and competence of both a generalized and more specialized kind. There is the aspect of a state of readiness, a personal ability to make one ’s way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting” (Hannerz; 1996; 103-104). According to this description I believe that Hannerz would categorize Couchsurfers as cosmopolitans. Following Hannerz ideas I find more resemblances between surfers and cosmopolitans. Hannerz states “Cosmopolitans nowadays loathe tourists, and especially loathe being taken for tourst. Cosmopolitans tend to want to immerse themselves in other cultures, or in any case be free to do so. They want to be participants, or at least do not want to be too readily identifiable within crowd of participants, that is, of locals. They want to sneak into backstage rather than being confined to the front stage areas “(Hannerz: 1996; 105).

In my head I have linked utopia quite closely to CouchSurfing. This is for two reasons, firstly travelling is escapism and secondly CouchSurfing as a concept sounds so unrealistic that it is hard
to see how it can function. In Manheim’s sociology, utopia had originally a spiritual significance, namely that human beings cannot live meaningful lives without utopia, without a vision of the future, and the present is meaningless. The founder of project has often said that he could have never foreseen that CouchSurfing could have become as popular as it has or that some of members would feel so strongly about the community that they would aim to create a place (such as the CouchSurfing Island) where CouchSurfing would somehow act as a guide of conduct.

5.5 Impacts of the internet concerning tourism

As stated earlier Internet has revolutionized the human behaviour. It has profoundly changed the way we communicate, the way we act as consumers and the ways we gather knowledge. Travel industry and the traveller’s scene have also changed intensively since the arrival of the Internet. Few examples demonstrate this change quite well. The budget airlines, such as Ryanair and Easyjet only accept internet bookings and out of readymade package tours vast majority is been sold online rather than in travel shops. Those who book their vacation online normally get a substantial discount. The internet is been colonized by tens of service providers which offer bookings for hotels and hostels worldwide. Therefore, many budget hostels now only accept reservations that have been done online since it effectively cuts cost. Backpackers aim to make some profit by writing “travel-blogs”; hitchhikers meet online and look for rides on sites such as www.kimppa.net and www.hitcharide.com whereas families can look for others hoping to exchange their houses for few weeks through www.casaswap.com. Consequently within CouchSurfing one can look for a ride or a house swap possibility, because they have a high demand.

CouchSurfing has only not challenged tourism but the ways we “meet” online. The surfers first “travel” to the site which then itself turns into a form of transportation. The website boundaries are also fluid as the hypertext links transport the virtual traveller beyond the site itself. Jeanie et. all describes cyberspace and it’s impacts as follows: “Cyberspace in particular is imagined as a window on the world, a leisure space where travellers can roam the world without ever leaving their home. The notion of cyber tourism reveals the imagined potential of the internet for virtual mobility and playful activity, with metaphors such as “surfing” the information ”superhighway” underlining the centrality of travel, mobility and leisure to our conception of cyberspace. Cyber tourism can refer to several types of online practices, from clicking through websites, to taking virtual tours and to immersing oneself in” virtual reality” environments” (Jeanie et. all in Sheller
and Urry; 2004; 170). Urry himself believes that virtual travel and virtual proximity via e-mail and the Internet may gradually dissolve the distinctions between online and offline, the increased contact and information thus engendered may well heighten the desire to be corporeally present in a place and hence to travel there (Urry; 2002; 269-9).

The virtual mobility has increased enormously our physical mobility. Paula Bialski has observed that the act of mobility changes the nature of interpersonal interaction, and that in some cases (as my example of Couchsurfers) demonstrate that certain individuals become mobile in order to change their patterns of interaction, in order to gain something that their local environment does not seem to provide.

The rise of online social networks is by now a familiar story, one that has so far been told in numbers—and the numbers are staggering. Approximately three hundred thousand people create a profile on MySpace every week. Facebook and Twitter draws in even more people weekly. Whereas YouTube, which was purchased by Google in October 2006 for $1.65 billion, have over 13 million users. In South Korea, the network CyWorld has, in five years, attracted nearly a third of the country to its site, and nearly 90 percent of the nation's teenagers. These staggering numbers show that internet communities and networks are not going to disappear any time soon.

5.6 Home

“Place is security, space is freedom. We are attached to one and long for the other. There is no place like home”

Yi-Fu Tuan

We all know that home originates many saying such as the “Home, sweet home “and “Home is my castle”. Home is often described as the ultimate goal- as something that we all desire and long for, mostly because it offers us safety and security. Home is a small, protected and self-contained world which many want to keep “closed” and private. Home is also in the core of CouchSurfing. The network is build around surfers who all are willing to open their home to a stranger and allow them to penetrate into the highly personal sector of once life. Rowles states that “Home- it is a mirror or symbol of the self, a place where social and cultural identities become expressed and stabilized. The
experience of home is largely unselfconscious and unrecognised until threatened” (Rowles; 2005; 361). The question remains why do some choose to voluntarily place their home under a potential threat? Rowles in a way answers my question by stating that “Home provides the physical and social context of life experience” (Rowles; 2005; 3). In surfers I personally look for fun, inspiration, company and stimulating conversations. In many ways I allow people to enter my home and into my private life purely for selfish reasons. I am willing to take the risk and allow strangers to enter my home because quite simply everyday life tends to be boring. When I agree to host a surfer I tend to ask from myself why on earth am I doing this. I worry if she or he can be trusted, how will I feel having them around and what will they think of me. Few days before the surfer is scheduled to arrive I have butterflies in my stomach and I think of ways how to avoid the forthcoming event. However, until now I have enjoyed most of my surfers enormously and spending time with them has been a gift. One of the surfers states that CouchSurfing is “more about restoring faith in fellow human beings. It's about the realization that even in this competitive environment human goodness still exists in the hearts of people and it just needs a spark to ignite it. As a bye product you learn patience and tolerance.”

Sara Ahmed has said that the stranger only comes to be recognized when coming too close to home. Given this, there is always an encounter with strangeness at stake, even within the home. The home does not secure identity by expelling strangers, but requires those strangers to establish relations of proximity and distance within home, and not just between home and away (Ahmed; 2000; 88).

The Oxford English dictionary defines home as "a place, region or state to which one properly belongs, on which one’s affection centre, or where one finds refuge, rest or satisfaction.” Home has great deal of meanings to people. Home obviously is closely related with the idea of travelling. Pressures of home encourage us to travel, roam free or flee. Quite simply we want to escape the tedious everyday routines of home when we decide to travel. Returning home is also at the core of travelling. Some enjoy it more than others, but what makes travelling so enjoyable is the knowledge that somewhere there is a home to return to.

As Bachelard explain “the house represents a metaphorical embodiment of memory and thus identity” (Bachelard in Morley; 2000; 19) - for these reasons home is sacred. We build it as an image of ourselves and we want to protect it from all harm. However, we also want to liven it up - we throw dinners, parties and gatherings so that the home would live in our memories. In the case of Couchsurfers we invite people around to ours and more so we enjoy visiting the homes of others.
I have found myself talking to my surfers and hosts on a very intimate level. I could argue that this is because the discussions often take place in the comfort of someone’s home. Intimate occasions are often those on which we become passive and allow ourselves to be vulnerable, exposed to the caress and sting of new experiences.

5.7 Strangers

“With Strangers, we find ourselves”

Sarah Ahmed

Who actually is a stranger and how do we perceive them. Strangers are something that we are taught from an early age to beware of, we make fun of them, call them with names and at times we fear them. Who are these strangers that carry this stigma? Particularly those who vividly differ from us can seem threatening but anyone unknown to us can feel intimidating. But all and all stranger is someone who we have not met before.

However, to some, as Sara Ahmed argues “The alien is a source of fascination and desire. Making friends with alien, being hospitable to aliens may allow us to become humans” (2000; 2). Couchsurfers as for one seems to be a group who search for strangers, a group who is eager to meet those different to them. Here one must state that the CouchSurfing community is to some extent an elitist postmodern tribe and surely showing solidarity to those who are in good health, who are well educated and wealthy (enough to travel) is relatively easy even when they are strangers. This said meeting someone new can be nerve-racking.

Home, CouchSurfing and strangers create an odd scenario since they are all very closely connected. Ahmed states that “The condition of being a stranger is determined by the event of leaving home” (Ahmed; 2000; 78). The mass mobility seems to have made strangers of us all. Taken this under consideration we all should be more hospitable towards stranger, aliens and foreigners since most of us at some point faces a situation where we have to rely on help from someone we do not already know.
People who dare to rely on the hospitality of others are a rare breed. Yet still I have encountered such kindness and generosity from others unknown to me and I hope to pay them back by showing the same warmth to the strangers that show up on my doorstep. Dan, one of the surfers that I hosted, said to me; *You know, I have always thought that world is a cold and ugly place, filled with people who only care about themselves but it is not so. The best part of my trip has been the amazing people I have met. The stories, laughter and smiles I have shared with them stay with me for as long as I live and will remember to talk about those people to my children and grandchildren because they have really touched me more that anything. They have given me a home away from home when I have most needed it.* What I found astonishing is when he told me that his mother had joined CouchSurfing while he had been travelling. She had said that she wanted to offer shelter on travellers because those same people had looked after her son so well while he was on the road. As Ahmed rightly puts it: *All comes down to recognizing familiar qualities in complete strangers* (2000; 7.) I believe that Dan’s mum saw his son in travellers that she hosted and that they were no longer strangers to her. My own, first CouchSurfing experience was somewhat overwhelming. For sure some of this was due to the fact that I did not know what to expect but the kindness and trust I received from my host was bewildering.
PART TWO

6.0 CouchSurfing Culture and experience

"CouchSurfing is like a broccoli. It has many stems, but only one stalk. It is the matrix of memorable experiences.

Senoba

For this thesis I have been interviewing couchsurfers in Tampere area. These have not been so much as interviews, but warm, intimate discussions. I have been gradually collecting stories concerning their travels and on the friendships that they have developed through the site. We have shared views, opinions and experiences. It did not really surprise me that I bonded to some extent with the surfers I interviewed, just as I have bonded with lot of the people I have met through the network. The sense that people within the network are kindred spirits can be rather easily detected.

There was practically only one question I asked from everyone; “Why have you gotten involved with the community and what was your first experience alike?” Even when the question was the same each answer was different and unique. Every story turned out to be different, although some reoccurring themes could be detected. The first time you host or surf seems to be the defining moment for many and from this experience people usually decide whether they stay in the network or decide that it did not live up to the expectations. So far I have not met a person who would have decided that this form of travelling is not for him/her. It seems that people (might) take breaks away from it but so far everyone I have met have wowed to continue to use CouchSurfing in one way or the other. However, this form of travelling is not everyone and undoubtedly many have dropped out or just opened the site and quickly done a U-turn. CouchSurfing as a concept can easily weed out many people, even those who have a burning desire towards travelling or foreign cultures, but who just lack that certain kind of a mindset that is needed when CouchSurfing or just simply are not interested on the whole concept.
This chapter concentrates on the issues and an idea that I have been discussing with the surfers I have met as well as it aims to demonstrate how the community functions and what the experiences within it can be like.

6.1 First cut is the deepest

I remember my very first CouchSurfing experience that occurred in Vienna. I re-call being very nervous, tense and anxious before I even got on the road. I had written on my diary that I received an odd reply from Vienna and that I was not sure if I wanted to surf after all. I remember hoping for a host who would have references and friends on their profile, as they would act somehow as character witnesses and having them would have undoubtedly made me feel more at ease with the idea of staying with strangers. However, I decided to surf with a pair of CouchSurfing virgins and soon enough I found myself in Vienna.

I re-call sitting on the train from Ceske Budejovice to Vienna and writing on my diary; “Hmm, I’m on the right train but I have no idea where I should go from the station, I am having big butterflies in my stomach and I don’t know how to shake them off. This method surely makes travelling different and interesting”. It was nearly 35 Celsius degrees when I arrived to Vienna for the first time ever. I am known to have the worst sense of direction and I felt intimidated. I somehow managed to locate the tube station and off I was to meet my hosts. As the stops went by I cursed them for living so far away from the city centre. However, when I surfaced from the subway I heard someone calling my name and when I looked across the road and I saw a small girl waiving and smiling at me. Sense of relief and excitement rushed through my head, why was I so scared and worried? My hosts whisked me to their flat, offered me lunch and invited me join them for a swim. In a matter of minutes I found myself back in the car and off we went to the countryside, where I possibly could not have gone without them. On the drive there I was asked to select a CD to play in a car and in the nick of time there were three people singing out load to The White Stripes and all the worries that we all secretly had had magically disappeared and a sense of relief filled their old Fiat.

I had stayed in a hostel in Cesky Krumlov and after that experience CouchSurfing felt like a godsend. On the first night we cooked food together, we stayed up until 4 am talking about politics, music, racism and death. We drank alcohol, we laughed so hard that our bellies ached and all I
could think was; “is this for real?” The next day I wondered around the city alone while my hosts decided to return to the lake we visited the day earlier. In the evening I had arranged to meet another Couchsurfer whereas she had arranged to meet other surfers and soon enough I was in the middle of a classical concert in a park whilst having a picnic. My hosts, Birgit and Felix joined us later on and we had a miraculous evening. There was a true sense of networking in the air and later on that night I also met a surfer whom I was to host soon after returning home.

I spent three days with Birgit and Felix. I think it was “love at first sight”, we really bonded and through each other we fell in love with CouchSurfing. During those three days they learned more about me than some of my friends have learned in 20 years. All in all the three days I spent with my hosts were remarkable and I consider them as very close friends of mine, who I have revisited and whom I stay in close contact. It all could have gone very differently, if my first experience would have been a bad one I would have probably forgotten the whole CouchSurfing and returned back to more ordinary forms of travelling such as backpacking.

The connection we had was extremely strong. I actually forgot at times that indeed I was a visitor, and not one of them. Just as Suvantola says; “Travel becomes a play in which we can act out new roles” (Suvantola; 2002; 54). I immediately took the role of a local, because my surroundings encouraged me to do so. The illusion that I was a local was extremely strong. For instance when buying milk and bread from the small local grocery store, saying my greetings in German and walking back to the flat I had a key to, made me feel like I lived there. And for that short period I did, I was living Vienna, not just visiting Vienna.

Marko², one of the people I interviewed said that he had doubts when he joined the network and if the first surfing would have been a bad one he would have not thought twice about leaving the network. Marko and his girlfriend surfed for the first time in New Zealand. Marko described his first experience as tremendous;

“We had just spent three nights on the woods, sleeping in tents and huts, covered in mud, feeling cold. We had a very dampened spirit at the time. I remember it was difficult to find a host in New Zealand, but this one sheep farmer eventually promised to host us. We arrived at his farm, feeling a bit suspicious but the moment we got in, saw the fireplace and the table where

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² All interviewed names have been changed
dinner was laid out we were sold out. It was mad, she washed our dirty clothes and we made them Karelian pies. They said it was a good deal. It was their first time as well and they were well pleased that we were their first guest. The master of the house was a bit strict and quiet but his wife was just so sociable and fun. They had recently retired and they wanted to come over to Europe and travel by using CouchSurfing. They said that they were practising by hosting people, kind of preparing themselves for the experience.”

It is not a surprise that Marko and his girlfriend have continued to use the network. However, Marko is one of those members who also use those, more traditional travel services such as hotels, hostels and B&B’s. He says that he surfs when he feels like surfing, and when he his girlfriend wants complete independence and space they use hotels, hostels or B&B´s. Nevertheless he is very keen on CouchSurfing and he thinks it is a valuable tool which people can use while travelling.

Jacque, a gentleman in his late fifties approached me with an e-mail.³ Jacque had had a wonderful first experience and he wanted to share his thoughts with me. He was pleasantly surprised that his host in Australia had invited him to join them in all sorts of activities; he had drinks with his host’s colleagues to celebrate the start of a new weekend, a visit to a local festival was organised for him and he even got a change to be part of grandpa’s anniversary dinner. He says that after that experience he could not help but think that it was now his turn to spread the joy. He continued by saying that he was a widowed man, who lives for travelling. He said that he is tired of travelling alone while staying in overcrowded hostels with people who are not even half of his age. With CouchSurfing he could finally spend time with people who were closer to his own age and whom he felt he had more in common with. Jacque says that what has been truly revolutionising for him is the fact that he has made many wonderful friends in his home town via CouchSurfing, and because of this his social life has been basically radically changed. This really shows that CouchSurfing is so much more than a mere travelling network.

Tiina, whom I interviewed, told me that she had joined the network because she could not afford to go travelling herself but who still wanted to feel that “foreign breeze”. Tiina says that; “I decided to join CouchSurfing because I gathered it was the next best thing to do. If I could not go and see the world, the world then would have to come and see me.” This seems to be relatively different reasons to join the network, most people, including myself join because we want to use it primary

³ E-mail to the author send 11/03/2008
for surfing whereas hosting is a secondary purpose. Tiina however, was interested in the hosting rather than surfing. She hosted people for nearly a year and half before she herself used the network for surfing and this is quite rare, to say the least.

Accidentally, I interviewed both Tiina and the surfer who had been first guest that Tiina ever hosted. It was interesting to hear both of them describe this experience. Johan is an Israeli, who now lives in Finland. He visited Tiina in 2005 and he says that Tiina has been one of the best hosts that he has stayed with. Tiina instead says that she respected Johan because he was extremely interested in the everyday life of her and her family. She was amused but proud because Johan wanted to help her family in making hay whereas he was excited that he got a possibility to drive in a tractor around the hayfields and experience a day of a Finnish farmer. The day ended with a traditional sauna. Consequently, Johan got bitten by the Finland bug, Tiina got bitten by the CouchSurfing bug.

First time Johan heard about concept of hospitality while travelling was when his brother had started using Heat. Heat is a hospitality network created by Christians who have left Israel. Heat is organised so that the Israelis’ who have left their home country could still have a strong bond to their fellow countrymen. They offer to host Israeli travellers across the globe. Johan was explaining that generally it is very hard for people from Israel to trust a stranger and hence a closed network where everyone is united through nationality/religion suits his people. However he wanted more versatility and decided to join CouchSurfing. As Suvantola states drifters (who can in here be seen as couchsurfers) need a lot of reach (Suvantola; 2002; 60).

Tiina’s first surfing occurred in Copenhagen. By then she was an experienced host and interested in seeing how others host. She recalls being rather upset when she finally reached her first hosts house. The house had been a mess, rubbish, empty bottles and old pizza boxes had taken over the floor space and she, who had used to keep her own home in tiptop shape for her guests, was surprised that some people host in such environment. She says that she was a bit disappointed at the time, but now she realises that the intimate cozy homely feeling comes from other things that from the tidiness of the house and at the end of the day she would not like someone to portray their house as something it is not. Home means different things to everyone and from one’s home we can read things about the person who lives there. In Tiina’s case, a happy go lucky hippie occupied this messy house, but according to her he had a heart of gold. Hence, CouchSurfing is open for all forms of accommodation, traditional couch in the living room, guest bedroom or a place to pitch a tent. The right attitude is what makes the difference and defines if the experience is spell-pounding.
6.2 High hopes and fears

At times I feel anxiety when meeting new people and seeing new, strange places, but if I did not take risks what kind of life I would then lead. This is one of the main reasons I have joined the CouchSurfing community. I have heard very similar explanations from many other Couchsurfers. Many have said that they simply want spice up their life and surmount their fears. Minna, a young girl I interviewed said that she is fully aware of the risks that she was taking. However, she refused to give in to fear because she could not bear the idea that her fear would stop her living and of being part of such fantastic network. From what I have gathered, men don’t find much to be scared off. However, most of the men I have interviewed completely agree that women should be more careful since there appears to be people who abuse the site. Many men say that if they were women they would think twice before using it (at least when travelling solo).

Johan, who used to supervise the CouchSurfing chat, said that there were an increasing number of people involved with the network who use it for dating purposes. He used to moderate the messages and apparently there were a growing number of interactions between people who were looking for guest or hosts that would be interested in having sexual relations as a side product. For a single woman travelling these are worrying news. It can be intimidating enough to ask from a male for a sofa, but if one has to worry about possible sexual undertones while surfing one’s couch, the experience could turn out to be anything but relaxing and fun. This is also unfortunate because many original Couchsurfers have left the network and joined some smaller hospitality service network instead in hopes of avoiding such behaviour. However, these problems occur in cyberspace regularly and in my opinion only closed invitation only-communities could avoid such nuisances.

Harassment occurs at times in a form of spam mail. Spam might seem harmless enough but when it is associated with a network like CouchSurfing it can do great damage. If someone would approach me through another channel with their sexually toned message I could laugh it off but knowing that these people host it does not seem that funny anymore. When I received a mail in which a man send his half naked photo with a request “do you want couch with me” I felt so disappointed and hurt. This was not what I had signed up for. Mails like these leave a bad taste and because of this certain mail I would think twice before surfing in Turkey with a male host. This is truly a shame that some nationalities are getting a certain kind of reputation because of the inappropriate requests. All the sudden people have become sceptical of all the members who come from these certain countries.
because of these requests. Countries like India, Turkey and Italy are some of the spots that especially girls seem to have become weary when thinking about surfing these countries.

For example, Marko’s girlfriend started to receive highly sexual orientated messages from the host they have used in Bulgaria. Even when they told him to stop harassing them the man carried on his crusade. Apparently he was convinced that she had flirted with him when he was hosting them and it was his right to send him seductive but extremely disturbing messages. He says that he would not be too happy if she (his girlfriend) would use the network alone after this experience.

There are never any guarantees when people are involved. Yet, I failed to see any fear or hesitation in the people I interviewed. Everyone seemed to have a high level of trust when it comes to fellow surfers. Everyone I have met and interviewed said that they feel that they are good judges of character and hence they believe that they could spot rotten characters within the network. Many also read the initial contact (can I surf your couch?-mail) carefully and they aim to read the undertones of the message.

Mari said that it is much harder to choose who you ask for a place to sleep than when you have to decide whether to host someone or not. I was positively surprised when generally most of the members I have met have seemed very genuine when they said that they try to accommodate everyone whose request is genuine and that they would never discriminated anyone on purpose. It seems that the only times they have refused a sofa, has been when prior engagements had already been made or if the request has been somehow rude, arrogant or malice.

That said some are more interested in hosting than others. All of the people I interviewed had a very different approach towards hosting. Tiina for example has e-mailed to people who have visited her profile. She asked them if they need a place to stay or any other form help. She also changed her profile location to Tampere for a while, because she was not getting any requests when her profile stated Kylmäkoski, a small town outside of Tampere. That to me says that she is extremely willing to hosts people whereas Johan quite blatantly said that he does not get particularly exited when he receives a request from a complete stranger. Johan has a very different approach to surfing than all the others I have met. He prefers hosting and surfing with people he has met online, for example in the chat room. He explained that he feels that these people are already his friends and he prefers making an attempt to visit them rather than choosing first the destination and then the couch. I for one at times make excuses and refuse to host even when I would have the time but not really the
energy. I do occasionally feel bad when I turn down surfers, but as said CouchSurfing is done by the terms of a host and it is completely acceptable to say no.

Mari was complaining that she had not gotten many requests during the winter. She said that last summer she and her partner were hosting nearly every weekend and that she was missing the action and excitement surfers bring with them. She reminisces last summer longingly and hopes that the summer 2008 will bring many new surfers to her life. Dialogue between the host and the surfer often involves social commentary and personal narratives. That said, discussions such as that, with a “stranger” are extremely rewarding and they can be easily longed for. Hence, CouchSurfing encounters can almost be categorised as a drug—once you have some, you want some more.

Many who I interviewed had joined the network as a group or with a partner. Santos for example said that “I never had any problems with trust, but maybe because the beginning was so easy for me. There were three of us who were using CouchSurfing and it was easy to host people, and I needed not to be worried at all.” Johan started hosting people with his parents, Mari with her partner and for example Lasse was living in a shared house, where he and his friends hosted together. Stepping to the unknown together with someone is a wise choice and it seems to ease the process.

Media has shown vast interest towards CouchSurfing. Overall the tone of pieces has been positive and many have commented that surfers are courageous people, though a bit mad. However, media has had hard time understanding why someone would trust a stranger. In many pieces I have read an interview with a police or security guard has been included with the piece. They all state that there is no way of knowing if the member is who she/he claims to be and networks such a CouchSurfing should be approached with caution. I would be the first to underline that when surfing take precautions, always let someone know who you are surfing with and keep a clear head on your shoulders. Secondly I would say that just do it and enjoy it. That is precisely what the people I have met have done.
6.3 In Company of strangers

What has puzzled me from the very beginning is the complex fusion of strangers and trust. These two themes have comfortably merged within CouchSurfing and it is difficult to perceive why it has occurred so effortlessly.

Sarah Ahmed has been my guide when I have tried to understand why strangers are perceived in such a positive light within the network. Have (we/they) simply followed Ahmed´s ideology and decided that stranger is not an origin of danger but an origin of difference and hence it has a positive connotation (Ahmed; 2000; 4). Ahmed reminds me that primarily strangers are viewed more as refugees and immigrants, secondary as something foreign. The CouchSurfing community is versatile, but the most active group is that of 20-30 years old. At then end of the day most of them are (highly) educated, wealthy and healthy people. It is easier to show trust towards a stranger whom has familiar qualities and “similar” background. I suppose we are “consuming” those strangers that proposes a smallest possible danger. Ahmed says that; “Strangers seems to be suspicious when they have no purpose that is they have no legitimate function within the space which cold be justify their existence or intrusion” (Ahmed; 2000; 31). In a sense, Couchsurfers don´t seem so suspicious, they have a purpose to be around “us”, they a surfing us because we belong to a same network.

Within the network some are more drawn toward strangers than others. Tiina for example has e-mailed invitations to surfers whereas for example Chris, who I have hosted “refuses” to host strangers. By this I mean, that he prefers to either know the people he has at his home or that the person who he is hosting has mutual friends with him. This said, he stated that he is willing to make exceptions in the future. I was a bit taken back by his comments; after all I had, with a doubt in mind, accepted to host him and realising that he would have not done the same for me upset me a bit.

Johan prefers to have a previous connection with the people he surfs with. He is one of those characters who spend a lot of time in CouchSurfing chat-rooms. He can talk to another surfer from months or even years and when an opportunity arrives he goes and visits them. He said “I meet people through the site and get to know people and who ever I like I try to go and see. I kind of travel to see the people instead of the places.” This view seems to be different to how Urry
describes tourism. According to him holiday has become less to do with reinforcing of collective memories and experiences and more to do with immediate pleasures (provided by the environment) (Suvantola; 2002; 102).

I was reading an article on Helsingin Sanomat where the reporter had travelled to Panama to surf. He says that from flight from the capital Panama to Bocas Del Toro island group took an hour and from there another 20 minutes by boat before he reached his host and her couch. I could not help but wonder what makes someone to travel so extensively to meet a complete stranger basically in the middle of nowhere. When I continued to read the article I found out that the family who was hosting the reporter had only just moved there three weeks ago from New York, hence they seem like very attractive and interesting strangers.\(^4\) I instantly was interested what had provoked such a massive, life altering change and wanted to know more about these people. What I am trying to say is that some locations and even more so some strangers are more attractive that others.

Quite simply as Tiina stated that communication is easier with Couchsurfers because there is some common element, some kind of spirit which combines you, that’s not seen around the people I’m usually around in my place. This ‘common spirit’ means a large number of similarities, including their likeness to interweave mobility into their life mission.

### 6.4 The magic feeling

“CS has changed my life: I've met new, wonderful souls; some will be with me for life. Sometimes, I’ve travelled with very little money, but I’ve always been welcomed, not just in people's homes but in their hearts. CS breaks down class distinctions, barriers between gender, race, and sexual orientation. It opens ears. It allows us to learn from people outside our normal purview, comfort zones. CS has altered my sense of what's possible between strangers and what all countries must discover if they wish to fully participate in the 21st century. It's a movement destined to challenge national fears and assumptions and grapple with our growing paranoia. We're opening up the world, one couch at a time.”

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\(^4\) HS; 19.04.2008
It is difficult to portray CouchSurfing. It obviously means so much, to so many people. I believe that it is making a great difference, not only to those who use it but to whole world. It might seem to an outsider that surfers exaggerate the importance of CouchSurfing. The fact is that is has motivated people to travel, it has allowed people to experience new cultures from a very different perspective and it has created global connections and strong ties between people and their cultures, religions and politics. Taylor described CouchSurfing that “it (CouchSurfing) moved away from being a tool, a means, and became a community, a force of positivity, a dynamic movement that did not seem to take or give, but just “spread love”.

Mark Neumann writes that; “Road away from home calls out to many with different promises” (Neumann in Ellis; 1992; 176). People seem to desperately seek something that will move them, touch them emotionally. They look for things that can challenge and excite them. Neumann continues that travelling offers an opportunity to belong differently to the world for a while (Neumann; 1992, 177). CouchSurfing to me encourages this idea. For instance I see my own life differently when hosting someone and whereas surfing I often almost fantasise what my life would be like if I was living/inhabiting my hosts life/home. For instance like in Vienna, I was almost playing a role-play.

For instance Appadurai argues” through the globalizing uses of media technology, the balance between lived experience and imagination may have shifted. Everybody, almost everywhere, is more than ever before aware of many possible lives, fantasy has become a major social practice. Yet people may act on such fantasy in different ways. They may, for example, engage with media, and then migrate to a possible life depicted there. But once such move has been made, that which one has left has become another possible life” (Appadurai in Hannerz; 1996; 101). CouchSurfing does allow this mediascape to happen in real, actual life.

Since the community don ´t discriminate anyone, everyone who has courage or interest to join is welcomed in. Therefore the most colourful and surprising characters can be found within the community. There are CouchSurfing junkies, these addicts that look for peculiar and strange places to surf or a bit odder hosts. Lasse, who had travelled across Europe for a few months last summer, said that the experience can become quite boring if you always look for a host who is approximately same age as you are, a host who likes similar things that you do and….. Basically at the end of the day you have a great time getting drunk whilst touring the city/town but it offers nothing that truly challenges your views and ideas. Lasse sounded still rather disappointed when he was telling that
once he was meant to surf with a notorious drag-queen who was know to throw lavish parties in his penthouse in Nice. Due to financial issues Lasse had to cancel the trip that he thought, could have been magical, strange and wonderful and more so something completely different to the life that he leads back home in Tampere.

Sometimes it is nice to stay with a person, who you can relate to, but frequently people look for those hosts that are your opposite, or they just appear to be somewhat outrageous or strange. Mari told me an inspiring story. She and her girlfriend got a strange request from Latvia. Two rightwing Christians who were coming to some sort of nuclear convention to Finland send them a surfing request. Mari, being a leftwing lesbian (this is quite clearly stated on her profile) thought that it was extremely weird that they had approached them, but decided that it would be wrong to deny their stay just because they seemed to extremely different to her. This unlikely group ended up having a good time, while discussing issues on which they all had very different opinions. Within the community surfers can explore different types of people, those who they, in ordinarily would have little or no contact with. Surfing with a “strange stranger” can actually bring down boundaries and stereotypes.

Internet and Internet communities have created a channel for bizarre adventures and connections. These connections break boundaries, they challenge stereotypes and more than that they allow us to reach for the unknown. Bauman reminds that “in a community people remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors” (Bauman; 2002; 10). Hence, community, such as CouchSurfing welcomes members from all walks of life. Many who I interviewed stated that they love the network because it ´s multifunctional and multidimensional. My friend Michael said to me that he sees the network and the members as people who are trying to destroy every possible geographical or cultural barrier and that they are aiming to create unique, open community. Boundaries appear when a person has no access to internet, other than that it is an open space where anyone can participate on many major languages.

One can find surprising characters from the network. There is a legendary, elderly lady in the south of France, who just wants to host young people in her château. She apparently just wants to liven up the place and simply just have some company. Tiina met in Moscow an Indonesian diplomat who was more that happy to host a hippie like group in his apartment whereas I have stayed with a retired circus clown in the heart of Tuscany. The diversity of the group is quite staggering. I
suppose that most people value the possibility of meeting those who would under normal circumstances fly under their radar.

It can take a moment before one understands that he or she is experiencing something wonderful. The hospitality network tourist can not open a brochure or click on a website in order to 'preview' the experience. Experiencing the hospitality and friendliness of a complete stranger is something that many have gotten hooked on. Best to describe this is a story that Marko told me;

Sarajevo, that was marvellous. There are very few hosts there, especially those who would have references in their profiles. There was this one profile, that had tens and tens of positive comments, where people were saying that if in Sarajevo, you just must have to stay with this guy, he is amazing. In this profile there was a picture of a 40 year old man, with a bike, completely nude with a joint in his hand. It took us a bit time to decide weather to write him or not, but after reading his references again we decided that he was our guy. So I wrote him a request and very shortly he writes us back. His mail was something like four pages long and completely all over the place. Somehow I managed to locate his address and directions to his place within the mail. He did not want to know the dates we were planning to come, he just said that you come when you com, just give a ring when you are on your way. We arrived from Monastir to Sarajevo quite late; it was something like eight or nine in the evening. I looked into the advice he had send us, like witch tram would get us there, but it seemed hopeless, so we took a taxi. The taxi found the place; it was like this large complex of houses. There we tens and again tens of these massive buildings with fourteen floors or so. They all were covered with holes from crenate fire. By this one house there was burned down car and that just happened to be the house where the taxi driver dropped us off. By then we were very nervous, but eventually we gathered the courage to go in the house. We were not sure if this was the right house or a right block. It was really dark inside, because none of light bulbs worked. Our host lived on the 14th floor and the elevator looked like it could collapse at any moment. However, we took the risk and rode it up to the 14th floor. We had very mixed up feelings when we got up, it all felt very strange. It was pitch dark up there and I took a tiny led-light so we could see something. None of the flats had any names or numbers on the doors and anyways, we did not even remember our hosts surname and both of us were ready to give up. Then I saw that some bikes were stored into a corner and since I host had had a bike in the picture we decided to ring the doorbell that was closest to the bike. Soon enough this guy comes to the door. He was weird looking bloke with just one dreadlock hanging from his otherwise bold head. I think he was stoned or something. Anyways, he just said come on in, showed us to the living room and left. So we sat there
for about 20 minutes in silence, giving each others long glances before he comes back. He told us that his mom was sleeping at the next door and we should be quiet. Then he asked if we wanted to have something to eat, we declined but he insisted to heat up some leftover macaroni that he had eaten earlier. It was kind of funky food. He also served us some homemade plum vodka. He seemed really uptight and quiet and I just thought that he can’t really speak English but we tried to talk with him about allsorts. So we just sat there in silence until his girlfriend came along around 1am. She was much younger than he was and very talkative. She could not keep quiet. So the situation was now completely reversed. So after couple of hours he joins in the conversation, we have a good laugh and a great chat. After a rough start, thing turned out to be brilliant and we ended up staying there for like 4 days.

He spend his days playing poker online, occasionally he would venture into a casino. He was passionate about cycling and he hated cities. He could not understand why we wanted to visit a place like a Sarajevo. He said to us “don’t go into town, it is horrible there, go into woods, although there are still some mines, but don’t you mind about them!” What a lovely guy, we just spotted from his facebook profile that they had gotten a child. Bless! It was just mad because these people had witnessed the war, she had lived in Sarajevo throughout the siege and he was an refugee who travelled across Europe and faced nothing but contempt and hatred and still after all of this, they opened their home and hearts to us.5

I wanted to include this piece, because it demonstrates CouchSurfing experiences extremely well. Surfing with a stranger can be painfully awkward before the surfer and the host find a common ground, a common melody as to say. Many others would have probably turned away but Marko and his partner battled through the awkwardness and ended up having, according to him- one of the most memorable experiences ever.

The founder, Casey Fenton wants to take even surfing further. He has a dream to start a something he calls a CouchSurfing university. The first version of this has already up and running. On the profile, there is a slot where a surfer can write what she or he could teach to another person and this has turned out to be a bit of success. You can look for a host who has similar hobbies and skills or someone who is doing something that you had always dreamed of. A surfer can travel to another country and learn from the host anything from weaving to surfing, juggling or throat-singing.

5 Translated by the author
Possibilities seem to be endless and because of this surfing will most likely just get funnier and funnier. CouchSurfing magic can only happen when people care about each others, and yet again the site has offered its user a new way to show that they care. Basically it is up to the user in which ways she/he wants to make use of the network. Most likely the community will back you up and allow you to experience different options.

6.5 Meetings

I have also gathered information from Tampere group and from the meetings they have held. I have simply chosen this field because it was most easily accessible for me. The Tampere group is “rather young” and not particularly well organised, as to say these events occur irregularly. In meetings we discuss on our travel plans, exchange information on “good destinations” and generally just have a nice time with likeminded people.

However, this summer (2008) the group suddenly activated itself and throughout the summer meetings, gatherings and happenings have taken place once or even twice a week. Many have dropped out from the meetings, and I for one have felt that attending all the meetings would be too overwhelming. I enjoy the meetings, but I will always associate CouchSurfing with travelling and localizing and making it an everyday activity eats away the excitement. Now we have chocolate tasting, birthday parties, barbeques, sauna-nights and camping trips just to mention few. I don’t want to feel obliged to attend every meeting, but I also feel that when not attending I exclude myself from the network. But when taken into consideration out of over 200 couchsurfers in the Tampere area only a handful has taken an active role within the meetings.

However, meetings are in the heart and soul of the network and they tend to be a fun and relaxing. On one occasion we met at a restaurant and no one really knew how many people would turn up. I was the second to arrive. One rather confused looking girl was walking up and down the restaurant floor. I went to her and instantly we knew why we were there. We greeted each others like we were old friends and took a seat and started chatting. It was her first meeting and when I asked why she had decided to come she stated what approximately 99% of couchsurfers would have said. I wanted to meet “crazy, likeminded cool people”. During the evening is becomes clear that we indeed are likeminded; most of us hitchhike, do volunteer work or work on organic farms through
organisations like Helpx and Wwoof. More so we all generally just seem to desperately seek adventures that would save us from everyday boredom. We all have wanderlust.

During the evening we discussed alternative travel methods and I said that I don’t like to hitchhike alone; that I find it scary and unnerving. One of the girls looks at me strangely and asks; “What, don’t you trust strangers”? I find this question rather odd considering the company I am in. After all it was CouchSurfing, a network full of strangers that brought us together in the first place. This really made me think how adventurous and bold most couchsurfers are and how timid and scared I actually can be.

In the summer 2007 the group organised together with Hospitality-club a two day meeting. This meeting was a success, hence a meeting was organised again for July 2008. Participants came from Poland, Italy and Germany to name a few. It is organised so that it comfortably co-exists with the Tammerfest music festival, so that our international guests get a possibility to enjoy Finnish culture. We booked a time slot in Rajaportin Sauna⁶, so that the surfers also had a change to experience this great Finnish tradition. All and all everyone wants to give a good and positive image of Tampere and of Finland to our international guests, so that they then in return would “market” us as a place worthwhile a visit. Johan, who has been the ambassador for Tampere said that it would be ideal if Tampere had a unit of ten or more active couchsurfers, so that when ever someone receives and international guest, the active group could unite and provide the best possible experience for the surfer. I don’t fully applaud this idea. It would be nice to know that if “my surfer” would like to meet other local surfers that would be possible, but I would hate to feel obliged to inform others every time I had a surfer.

However, these get-togethers are a fun way to create new connections and they are gaining more popularity. Anyone can organise a meeting and advertise it on the meetings page. Meetings and gatherings offer a great venue for networking. For example Tiina, who is a meeting addict, uses meetings to build connections and from those connections she then draws up travel plans. The people she has meet, for example at the Berlin beach camp (one of the largest CouchSurfing get-togethers) and the traditional New Years meetings have dictated to some extent who she plans to travel with and where to.

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⁶ A public sauna in Pispala, Tampere
Localized meeting takes place across the globe. For example the elder Dutch couchsurfer that I told about earlier e-mailed me that CouchSurfing had radically changed his life. Through the network he has attended and organised CouchSurfing meetings and this has changed his social life drastically. He says that he does not have to be alone anymore, he organises board game evenings with others surfers and for example if he fancies a walk along the beach he just posts an announcement on the meeting page and awaits others to turn up. He says that he is very happy that he has found such a fantastic way to enrich his life. He explained that it had been difficult for him to connect and make friends after his wife had passed away. He was surprised that he could find company, young and old that shared his passions to life.

6.6 CouchSurfing invasion (friends, family, social life)

The networking possibilities seem to be endless. In a large, popular tourist destination CS could easily invade you life. My friend and host from Budapest told me that she was forced to leave the network temporarily. Hosting surfers started to feel like a fulltime job and she could not cope with the emotional farewells. Some obviously feel more emotionally touched with their host/surfers than others, but for sure it is not easy to say goodbye. I remember me and my host in Budapest crying from happiness when we were reunited and couple of days later we were both in tears, since we did not know when and if we were ever to meet again. We were discussing about the stress that CouchSurfing brings with it- stressing if the host and surfer gets along and stressing if they get along too well. Longing to see again the people who might live on the opposite corner of the world can be tough.

One of the surfers I interviewed in Tampere also decided to change his sofa-status, from definitely to maybe, since his “real” social life started to suffer from his “hobby”. We both have a similar dilemma, many our friends seem to perceive the whole idea of CouchSurfing somewhat strange, even lunatic and we both have failed to bring existing friends to the community. This is not to say that for example my friends would have not been keen to meet the surfers I have hosted, quite the opposite. They have been exited when I host and they have often wanted to meet the “crazy folks” who enter my life through the system.

Santos and Mari both discussed about how many of their friends enjoy meeting the surfers they are hosting. They both have made a habit out of going out and meeting friends for a drink or a meal
while hosting surfers. Santos said that he does it particularly because many of his friends have not really travelled and he wants them to enjoy a sense of another culture. He says that both his surfers and his friends have enjoyed meeting each others and he is hoping that the travel bug would bite some of his friends when they meet wonderful people around the world. Mari also wants her surfers and her friends to have some form of contact with each others. She often takes her surfers to her friend’s place where they cook together. Her friends enjoy meeting “the new faces”, since they spic e up their life as well.

Families however seem to be a completely different thing. Over and over again I have heard stories about parents who have followed their children’s footsteps and joined the community. I have already told about Dan’s mum who joined the community while her son was travelling and during my research I heard many stories where parents have gotten involved with the community. For example Johan’s parents have taken an active role in CouchSurfing since their son moved to Finland. Their first experience was rather negative one and that made them question why they were putting themselves through it. A single girl came and spends three days in their bedroom, without speaking nor showing any form of interest towards her hosts nor to the country or culture she was visiting. Johan said that his parents where highly disappointed and even upset because of her behaviour. However they took a risk and decided to host again and ever since they have had positive and exiting experiences with their guests. Few weeks back this elderly couple hosted eight teenagers from Holland and according to their son it was a “wicked experience”. The mother does not speak any English, but somehow she gets by with her international guests. Another couple from New Zealand decided to travel to Europe when they retire and they wanted to use CouchSurfing just like their daughter had done. A year before their trip they started hosting people in the home in New Zealand and by doing this they developed a vast network of friends in Europe who they were then planning to counter surf with. Networking is without a doubt is one key that should be used in order to get the most out of CouchSurfing.

Parents and friends can also be very sceptical about CouchSurfing. Tina spoke about her CouchSurfing friend who has not manage to tell her parents about the network and every time someone comes to surf, she lies and tells her parents that the surfer is someone she had met on the exchange programme, not some stranger she has met online. She also has visited a German couchsurfer in China, who did not want his roommates to know that she was merely a stranger. Tuula had to pretend to be an Austrian, literature student, who had met back in Europe. Tiina said that she found it very hard and very sad that she had to lie about her identity and “purpose”.
My friend from Vienna was forced to give up hosting because her new boyfriend disapproved the whole idea of CouchSurfing. To top that up he was extremely jealous and thought that she would meet someone else through the network. This goes to show that a certain mindset is definitely needed in order to function within the network. CouchSurfing is filled with couple’s and for example Tiina very promptly said that who ever she is ever going to date, has not only accept that CouchSurfing is part of her life, he also has to enjoy it.

6.7 What about the key?

Giving your guest the key is the ultimate statement of full trust. Not everyone practises it and I for one think carefully before handing the spare set for my surfer. I was offered a key in Vienna when I did my first surfing. It felt so unreal and bizarre, especially when the couple had never hosted anyone and I for one did not have references on my profile. Birgit later on said that they were very nervous about the key issue. They had been worried if I would have gotten terribly upset if they would have not offered they key to me. When I asked why they had decided to give the key she just simply said; “Because you were you”. I was very touched by her comment.

Every once in while one hears great stories, this one came from Hickey Hillier, an English couchsurfer;

“My housemate and I came back from seeing friends on night around 12.30am to be greeted by 11 couchsurfers sitting in our living room drinking, witch we knew there probably would be. However, we only let in 5 in the afternoon and the other 6 had come in while we were away. We had told the others to let the latecomers in. In fact when we arrived back home we only knew five of them by name and to the others we had to introduce ourselves and explain that we indeed were their hosts”.

This example demonstrates how laid back others can be. I could never act as Hickey did and when I asked him how he could trust eleven strange people with his worldly belongings he said; well that is just what they are belongings, material things can be very volatile, it is the memories and stories that stay with me”. If someone, in this case 11 strangers would steal all your worldly belongings surely it would make a great story. One could argue though that these people are really no strangers. Ahmed asks “How do you know the difference between friend and a stranger? How do you know a stranger? These questions are assumptions that the stranger is the one who is precisely not the object of knowledge. A stranger is no any-body that we have failed to recognise, but
somebody that we have already recognised as a stranger as a “body out of place” “(Ahmed; 2000; 55). Question therefore is how long one can stay as a stranger and more so is anyone a stranger among CouchSurfing, hence the people are precisely where they have planned to be, not being out of place.

Marko told me a story from their travels in Iceland. They had once again had difficulties in finding a host, Reykjavik being one of the top spot on the CS map. They mailed a request to various people and everyone replied, we would love to host you but unfortunately we have already a guest coming that week. Marko made a one last, desperate attempt and wrote to this couple whom then replied that they were not in Reykjavik that week. However Marko and his girlfriend were welcome to stay at their house while they were away if they did not mind lacking a tour-guide. Marko then collected keys from the couple’s friend and he and his girlfriend ended up having this beautiful house all for themselves. This kind generosity and trust blows my mind away. Especially because I see myself as a “good” Couchsurfer, but because I could never act as the Icelandic couple acted I do feel less worthy. It almost makes me feel like a not fully qualified member of the community, because I cannot fully trust my peers, because I have not fully let down my guard.

Marko has later on given keys to some of his guests. He told me about three Russian girls who were staying with him and who had nearly fainted when he had offered a spare set of keys to them. Apparently they had looked at him as he was a raging mad and said that it would be unheard of giving keys to anyone other than a member of a family in Russia. Marko also hosted a finish girl who had come to Tampere for a week long exams when she was applying for art school. She was given a key for a week, and according to him she was more a lodger than a surfer. She used to come and go and most of the time she was nearly invisible. He also promised her, when she got accepted into the school that she could stay with them as long as she wanted while she was looking for a flat in Tampere. Once again I doubt that I could be so generous.

I have discussed the dilemma with the key with everyone I have met. Most seem to trust their intuition and everyone has claimed to be a good judge of character. Each surfer is “judged” individually whether they can be trusted with the key or not. Mari said that it was hard at the beginning to give a key to a stranger, but that is something that is getting easier and easier within time. I some cases the key is not even necessary, for instance if a surfer arrives late at night and is leaving the next morning there is no need for the key. However, when ever someone is staying longer than just one night the key issue is something that most of us has to tackle.
Putnam says that “An effective norm of generalized reciprocity is bolstered by dense networks of social exchange. If two would-be-collaborators are members in a tight knit community, they are likely to encounter one another in the future-or to hear about one another through the grapevine. Thus they have reputations at stake that are almost surely worth more than gains from momentary treachery. In that sense, honestly is encouraged by dense social networks” (Putnam; 2000; 136).

One would not be able to steal from member and still continue surfing, and hence it is hard to find a surfer who would risk of having a negative reputation. We also discussed this within the interviews and many came to the conclusion that one would have to be a completely rotten and horrible person if she/he would be ready to steal or hurt someone who had opened his/her house to him/her.

6.8 Arrival Stories

Everyone I Interviewed had backpacking experience and they all had used hostels in the past. They all had understood from an early age on that travelling was to be something that would be an important feature in their lives. When asked why they travel many have similar reasons- a desire to see the world, learn about new cultures, meet people with different background and basically just enjoy life. However, none of them found backpacking fully satisfying, even though it too, was good fun. It truly seems that tourism has moved from being an industry to a lifestyle, and how the hospitality exchange exists due to this change in personal motivations.

The original idea of backpacking was to stay in close contact with the local people. Now it seems to be a commercial, pub-crawl ´s orientated feature that you experience with other backpackers rather that with the locals. Suvantola is along the same lines as he argues that; “Observing Backpackers gives an impression that the reach for the "other culture" can be quite shallow and it is satisfied just by travel to a place were locals are quaint. Once there the interest is largely directed to other backpackers” (Suvantola; 2002; 128). Hence, all that I interviewed (myself included) had grown bored and weary of the backpacker scene and started looking for alternative ways to travel.

Suvantola argues that; “Compared to conventional tourism Backpackers apparently leave the tourist place behind, or at least intend to do so. Guidebooks such as Lonely planet try consciously to avoid the tourist discourse and provide "grass root level" description that would appreciate the local people ´s own perspective” (Suvantola; 2002, 135). Many experienced travellers however have grown bored with the “lonely planet- tourism” and claim that it differs very little from conventional tourism. Lonely planet guidebook series actually suffered a blow this spring, when it
was published that many of the guide-books were actually written by a person who had not even travelled in the country they were writing about. Hence they were not providing the first hand knowledge they claim to do. This is why Couchsurfers value their hosts and their inner knowledge above everything. They embrace the idea of a local guide who simultaneously is telling his/her own history that reflects the surroundings. Santos actually put it quite nicely when he said that “I’m interested in other people; they are the greatest part of the culture of the country I am visiting”. He told me when he visited Estonia it was extremely interesting to hear about the country’s history thought his hosts personal narrative. She had explained how the turbulent history and the vast changes that had taken place in recent years in Estonia had affected her and her family’s life. Santos said that he learned so much more from her than he could have learned from a guidebook. He continued by saying that this kind of “living history” is touching and that he gets very emotional when he hears stories such as the one the Estonian girl told her.

Suvantola states that in particular, the travellers seek to encounter events that will hold a special meaning for their personal life (Suvantola; 2002, 58). Travelling itself has deep impact of the personal life and identity, but just seeing things don’t provide this, for these people they have to be doing things. Ready made packages, guided tours and travel books can’t challenge these people enough and hence they have looked for this alternative way that helps them to travel the world and more so the individuals of the planet. Someone said to me that; “I expected to meet interesting people and to hear the non-tourist version of the cities I stayed in. What nobody warned me about was the genuine hospitality of my hosts. Each and every one of them wanted me to love their city as much as they did, and did their utmost to see it happen”.

It seems that Couchsurfers not only visit places, but perhaps more importantly they visit people/strangers. This is what really sets CouchSurfing apart from backpacking. We visit those that we do not yet know and those who we have met through the network. Through CouchSurfing we find those people in each city that we really want to meet- finding those people on the streets, just randomly could be outmost impossible. The desire to meet likeminded people is the driving force of the network. These experiences within private space are thus changing the tourist memory, and upon returning home, many of my respondents remember their host and the details of the host’s

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7 Aamulehti; 14.04.2008
home, rather than the actual place they travelled to, placing the public tourist space as something secondary. Hence, I got to hear funny and interesting stories from the surfers I interviewed and at the core of them there almost always seemed to be the person they had met, not the place where they had been. The warm heartiness and the openness of the surfers and hosts is simply staggering and many who I interviewed were lost for worlds when they try to explain the hospitality and the sense of welcoming they had experienced on their travels.

6.9 Exploring the world, exploring the network

It has become quite clear that CouchSurfing has especially helped those who travel alone, by choice or because they have no one to travel with. I can easily use myself as an example, I like to travel alone, I don’t necessarily need someone to hold my hand and help me to make decisions but at times I really need someone I can connect with, someone who can help me and someone who is just happy to show me around and offer their company. Hence, CouchSurfing has act as a path to likeminded people when I have needed companionship or simply just advice.

CouchSurfing has also proved to function in many other ways that just merely offering a site where one can find a bed. For example, Tiina has used the site in multidimensional ways. She was one of the members that took part of the Asia overland trip. The trip was advertised on one the groups on CouchSurfing site. One member was looking for travel companions for a trip to Russia, Mongolia and China. She replied to the message and soon enough she was a one of the explorers doing an independent tour across Asia. Tiina says that she could have never done the trip alone and CouchSurfing has act as a great stepping stone that has enabled her to meet travel companions come friends. Finding the roads less travelled seems to be an obsession for many.

She has also organised CouchSurfing excursions/gatherings herself. On midsummer she and few other Finnish surfers organised a trek in Lapland. Forty people took part on this week long visit to Lapland. She gets very exited when she reminisces the meeting. She got to be a hiking guide to surfers from Germany, Belgium, Russia, Hungary and Italy to mention a few and she was extremely proud that she did not loose any of her hikers into the wilderness and that chosen members got to see the true beauty of Lapland. She, in my opinion has a great sense pride over her country and culture and she seems genuinelly happy and proud to offer her insight of Finland to foreigners. She is indeed marketing and advertising Finland in a best possible way.
She also told me about Chinese surfer, who hosts his guest at his language school; he provides accommodation, food and beverages to his surfers, if they are willing to lend him a helping hand at the school. Hence, the surfers can teach conversational English at the English corners at the garden and once a week the surfers are asked to give a short presentation on any subject they find interesting. This is an interesting way to integrate with the local students who are not part of the CouchSurfing network. Tiina was saying that she thoroughly enjoyed her days at the school and it offered her interesting insight to the lives of the Chinese students.

6.10 Homeland

Now, it is not compulsory to travel far, far away in order to experience a true CouchSurfing moments. What I learned, was that many use the site even then, when they just want to travel around their own country. I was surprised to hear how many have either used or were planning to use the service in their native country.

Marko spend midsummer night surfing in Finland, he recalls; “We had decided to do a cycling trip that for some reason overlapped with midsummer night festivities. It was extremely difficult to find anywhere to stay, especially since we were looking for hosts in a small, Ruovesi region. Just at the last moment this girl mailed me and said that if we wanted we could stay with her, well actually she had asked her mum if she could host us since she was halfway through moving to a new flat. We thought, wicked but while we were cycling to hers we got a text message, where our host said that her mum had come down with flu and that we would have to stay at her messy flat. So, we had a “Ruvesi city-juhannus” and it was totally odd hanging out with her and her friends, since we did not know them beforehand. However it was very cool and sweet of her to help us out on such a special day.

You do no need to travel to the ends of the world to be surprised by friendliness and hospitality of strangers. As a matter of fact receiving such treatment in your country can be even more staggering. Tiina has also surfed in Finland with some of her international guests. Her guests wanted to go Porvoo and they had organised it so that she could go with them. Tiina found this experience particular special, because while driving through Porvoo she was admiring the old wooden houses, thinking it would be so nice to see one of those from inside. Just as it was, their hosts lived in an old
renovated school building and for her it was like a dream come through. So there she was, sitting in a Finnish kitchen, at Christmas time drinking malt wine with her hosts parents and talking about the city ´s cultural history. She said it was magical to experience such warmth in her own country. One does not have to travel to ends of the world in order to have a “true” CouchSurfing experience and in a way CouchSurfing is encouraging people to seek travel experiences locally. As Ahmed argues “it is the real home, the space from witch one imagines oneself to have originated, and in witch one projects the self both homely and original, that is most unfamiliar; it is here that the one is guest, relying on the hospitality of others” (Ahmed; 2000; 77). This notion is predominantly true within CouchSurfing. When visiting a friend or indeed a “stranger” one can be overwhelmed by the hospitality of others, in Tiina ´s case it seemed particularly overwhelming because the hospitality took place in her native country, a country that some could argue is a rather closed society.

Many including myself have learned to look at their own city with a different way. Username Essjai wrote to me and said that; “Another upside is that I’m becoming more grateful of the wonderful city that I live in. Before, I found myself thinking that I’d had enough of London, when in fact I was taking it all for granted. With CS I’ve played tour guide and host during my spare moments. CS has opened my eyes, heart and mind to embracing people, my hometown and life”. Someone said to me that guests bring her back to places where she normally would not visit, that guest will take her back to places that she has not visited for years and years. That it is almost like a trip down at the memory lane. It seems that most, if not all of us have some sense of a national bride and we naturally want to give the best possible image of our intimate surroundings and motherland.

6.11 “Cultural ambassadors“

It could be argued that CouchSurfing seems to fit more easily to some cultures. Couchsurfers can be found in over 220 countries, but for example in Japan most of the surfers seem to be westerners who live in the country. Lasse was talking about the westernisation of CouchSurfing. He is planning a trip to Japan and he seemed particularly exited to see “another side” CouchSurfing. He was a bit disappointed to see that most of the people offering their couch in Japan were not Japanese. He said that “Home is my castle” mentality seems to be very powerful in Japan and that those who are not immediate family members should not hold a permit to one ´s home. He seemed very concerned that if some local was to open his/hers house to him that he would somehow manage to offend them, by not knowing the appropriate manners and etiquette.
Me and Tiina got talking about how home was viewed when we were children. Tiina seemed to have similar childhood memories to mine. When for instance family had relatives or visitors’ coming over the main bedroom door was always shut. That was a clear sign to the visitor that that particular area was off the limits and that it should not be entered without a special invite. Maybe we (the next generation) do not seem home in the same way as our parents did more and hence we are more open minded when it come to home and the boundaries that surround it. However as said earlier on Tiina ´s parents were happy to have surfers staying with them nowadays, so undeniably the culture is changing.

6.12 (Food) culture

Another reoccurring theme I found from my data was the sense of pride over cultural heritage and national traditions and history. Santos, Johan, Tina and Lasse all talked about this theme extensively. Santos gave me a fifteen minute long monologue about how he sees himself as an ambassador for Portugal while he is travelling and when he is hosting his greatest desire is to introduce real Portuguese culture to his surfers. Santos said that;

“We cook the surfer a nice traditional meal and make it a nice experience for her. I though we could give her a lovely experience, my uncle makes wine and we have a big garden and she could really experience the way we live, eat and it is good. I wanted her to have a part of real Portugal, give her a nice expression of what Portugal really is like. And like, when I travel I always look myself as an ambassador for Portugal, I want to give a good image of my country. Because I always talk about my country when I go away. I want as many people as possible to come and see the country. …I love my culture, our food, our wine, our hospitality. “

Food is always perceived something that is closely related to cultural differences and on vacationing. Couchsurfers seem to appreciate a good food adventure as much as the next person; truly food is another theme that most surfers tackled while talking with me. For example Santos has a very passionate outlook on food, while he hosts people (for example in Bristol and Tampere) he always aims to cook a Portuguese feast for his surfers, but he also expects his surfer to cook a meal which is traditional for his/hers country. Santos argues that food is the one of the most important features in once culture.
Food is often in the heart of gatherings- For example at times one can find from Tampere group posts that state that ; “I have, for example Indian surfer coming so let ‘s make of night of it and gather to enjoy real Indian meal at my place.” We have also held gatherings that have been dedicated to wonders of chocolate or the ode to Finnish sausages. Foreign surfers have also posted messages where they ask “What must I definitely taste while I ´m in Finland”.

A relatively large percentage of couchsurfers seem to be vegetarian and often this is quite clearly stated on the person ´s profile. Vegetarianism as an ideology witch also portrays personality. There are some surfers who refuse to host people who eat meet, however most people only politely state on their profile that meet is no allowed to be cooked in their homes, but that they do not mind if the quest wishes to eat meet outside their home.

When surfing, guests are often “expected “to cook a traditional dinner from their home country for his/hers host. Many people in fact state this on their profile. I suppose that food carries with itself so many cultural connotations that it serves as a perfect springboard to a good and thorough conversation over once culture and traditions. Quite simply people just people are drawn towards food and often the case is that there are many chefs in one kitchen and everyone temps to make something small while learning about the other persons food culture. Thinking back it seems that most of the time I have spend either surfing or hosting has occurred in the kitchen. It seems that all over the world kitchen is in the very heart of every home. Often a guest also brings some small “tasters” from his/hers naive country. Tiina was giggling happily when she was reminiscing two French boys who stayed with her. They had brought her excellent bottle of wine and some goose pâté. On top of this they had cooked her wonderful meal. She said that she could not believe her luck when two good lucking men were pampering her in her own home.

Couchsurfers hence embrace the possibilities to enjoy real, native food, whereas many mainstream tourists often enjoy standard western cuisine on their travels. Authenticity in food seems to be as important experience for a couchsurfer. Suvantola had discussed importance of food extensively in his book Tourist ´s Experience of Place. He states that “Eating is such a universally shared phenomenon that in the absence of mutually shared language, eating the same food can be used to display at least some sense of understanding and togetherness. In this way eating the local food can be a way to lessen the distance to the Other people” (Suvantola; 2002; 149). He concludes that “In terms of reach, new kind of food is a way to reach for new domains” (Suvantola; 2002; 150).
6.13 Competing for the place in the “sun”

I think that for a surfer, profile is something that could be seen as curriculum vitae. Profile must be interesting and witty and it has to stand out. I talked about the importance of the profile with other surfers and everyone agreed that it is utmost important to really make effort when creating or updating a profile. Some cities/hosts are extremely popular and in order to successfully find a host, profile has to be in a top shape.

Since the community is expanding in a rapid rate many surfers have tighten their “requirements” - people have started paying attention more to the fact that some are simply after a free place to stay-somewhere where they can arrive late at night and leave in the morning without leaving the trace. It is not to say that this is wrong, but most people crave for the interaction. Hence, many now refuse to reply to those whose requests are obviously made by using cut and paste technique and which have no reference to the person they are asking to stay with. The tone and content of the requests-message is also extremely important. From these messages it is easy to detect if they are only after a free accommodation or if they are actually interested in having a CouchSurfing experience, which is all about interaction, communication and true interest toward another culture.

Lasse was speaking about this phenomenon and said that he understand people who do this but at the same time he said that some people have seem to have gone to silly extremes. “it is like you have to send a post card to someone’s grandmother before can request a couch or you have to write a deep analysis of yourself and them and report how you would get along. That is just crazy, I just want to meet and host people who I can show around town and some fun with. I do also hate to have surfers who come and go as they please and forget my existence”. Veijola has said that; belonging to a postmodern tribe can be compared to leaving a toothbrush there, where one spends the previous night. That brush might be the only stain that is left from the visit-to the place, other people and self (Veijola; 2005; 109). I recall that I opposed this idea strongly at first, but the more I have listened to surfers, it seems that even in this network many desire this, a clean, efficient, bond free, experience. It is down to once personality what you get from the experience- do you view is as a “one night stand” or lifelong friendship or is it a convenience factor or opportunity for adventure.
6.14 Telling stories

Travel accounts have always been at the very core of travelling. Schiebe suggests that “adventure plays a central role in the construction and development of life stories, and that life stories, in turn, are the major supports for human identities” (Schiebe in Ellis; 1992; 178). It appears that to the people I have met, interviewed and sent a questioner to, travelling is a significant factor that forms their social identity. They are building their identity through new culture and they draw ideas and inspiration from their travels. Urry claims that to be a tourist is one of the characteristics of the “modern experience”. It acts as a marker of one’s status in the modern society (Urry; 1990; 5). The more you travel and the more outrageous experiences you have the higher the status is.

Toping of the next persons experience has always been something that can be closely related travelling. First come’s the questions have you been here, have you been there and then the stories roll in. as Suvantola states; “The tourist comes home with the illusion that he has “been” there and therefore can speak with some authority about the place he has visited” (Suvantola; 2002; 61). Authorial voice has become explicitly important among travellers. We quite happily mock those who use organised mass tourist channels and even can “laugh” at someone who is one of our own if we feel that his/hers experience is not quite unique, wild and distinctive enough. Suvantola argues that “the feeling of sameness with fellow travellers ceases to be one of the most desired experiences” (Suvantola; 2002; 65) but concludes that individualism flowers among travellers. Hence, there seems to be this list that every traveller should have done, so that we can exchange experiences and once you have proofed to be a real traveller one can really start looking for those unique surroundings and top stories. It is almost as people travel for social ends rather than for experiences, seems that we collect places, visas and stamps that enforce our auras as experienced cosmopolitans. Urry has said that postmodern tourist see travel as a game (Urry; 1991; 100). I suppose that stamp and visa collecting can be seen as a part of this competitive game.

6.15 Utopia and strange desires

One could argue that the whole idea of CouchSurfing is close to utopia and to many it still might appear as such. Everyone who I have met within the community has underlined the fact that it is not for everyone and that it is all right.
The trust within the network seems the most controversial topic. Not to the members, but to the outsiders. I can understand why it is hard to people to throw out the window all of their inhibitions and hang-up’s for a sake of a complete stranger. Some of the people I have talked to have indeed said that it is some form of strange insanity that they rely on while surfing/hosting.

Michael said to me that he firmly believes that world would be a nicer place to live in if people trusted each other more. Michael is that kind of guy who has no problem to go up and talk to an old lady in the supermarket or a bum in the subway station; just because he believes they have interesting stories to tell. Hence he has no problems in trusting people. I believe that many people loose opportunities for connection out of fear and at the end of the day the rewards of talking small risks in trusting strangers greatly outweigh taking no risks at all.

CouchSurfing is peculiar phenomenon. It’s members have demonstrated strange desire for Utopia. Their shared visions for future might seem ridiculous for an outsider and even I have difficulties in believing that some of their cherished projects will never see daylight. One group is dreaming of starting a large farm whereas others are planning to purchase an exclusive CouchSurfing island. However there is nothing wrong at having scumptious dreams if they don’t harm anyone. Yet again, time will tell if these dreams ever actually come true. It would be quite remarkable if complete strangers would invest large sums of money to co-owned and co-habited islands, farms and eco complexes. If this was to happen one could read it as a sign of humanity, as a sign of true goodwill. However, one can’t yet say if these beautiful dreams will ever come true.

6.16 Bad experiences

As said, the network at times feels somewhat unreal. Very few people I have met have had any bad experiences, but I did came across few stories that have negative connotations. I met Lisette while Woofing (Willingly working on organic farms) and it was no surprise that she turned out to be devoted Couchsurfer. She told me about how well the “security network” had worked in a situation she faced when hosting. She had arranged to host an American guy and on the first night everything went smoothly. Lisette thought that the man seemed trustworthy and decide to leave him alone the house, while she went to the university. At some point of the day she decided to look at her e-mail at school and when opening her CouchSurfing mail box she found a message that warned her about her surfer. Apparently he had stolen some very valuable things from his previous hosts and that if
she was hosting him at the time being she should ask him to leave immediately. She then took few of her friends with her and headed back to the house. To her disappointment (and astonishment) she found him going through her stuff. This story really emphasis that it is important to send both negative references (if necessary) as well as inform the administrators of “rotten apples” who aim to abuse the network and other surfers.

Mari could not remember anything bad really happening, but she re-called being very disappointed with one surfer who was planning to stay with her. It was the first time she had agreed to host anyone and naturally she and her partner were awfully exited about their first guest. Mari had arranged to meet their guest at the train station when her train was due to arrive. They waited for the surfer for half and hour and eventually realised that she had stood them up. They send her a text message just to make sure if everything was all right and whether there had been a schedule change. She never bothered to reply and eventually they found out that she had stayed with another surfer while in Tampere. Mari felt hurt and upset, her high hopes had been crushed and for a while she thought that maybe CouchSurfing was not worth the hassle. She obviously gave it another go and has not regretted it.

My worst experience was when hosting an American girl. She made me think if it was worth the trouble spending time and effort on these strangers, who can’t or won’t give anything in return;

Doorbell rings, oh well, my guest must be back. I open the door only to face critique and complaints. “What’s for dinner, is it ready soon, I am famished, my feet hurt, it’s so cold, and how come did it get dark so early...” Why do I do this I think to myself? She is rude and vulgar and I really don’t want her in my home...Few minutes later when I am slaving away by the stove making soy-mince Bolognese my guest decides to comment that one would find it hard to believe that I was a vegetarian since I have a few extra pounds around my waist. She continues by stating that I definitely should stop eating pasta and maybe think about exercising every once in a while. I can’t believe my ears, this person, a stranger, who I try to entertain (while biting my lips) is insulting me in my own home. I wanted to take her by her collar and throw her out of my home. This, however I did not do, instead of few minutes later I recall complimenting her on her excellent pronunciation of Finnish while she is reading out loud the label of bread packet.

Nothing extreme there, but I remember feeling very hurt by her comments. I also felt that she was insulting the whole CouchSurfing network. One “rotten” apple left a bitter taste to my mouth and
for a while I had no interest hosting anyone. I have told this story to others and it has left many stunned and unhappy. However, it takes more that this one girl to put me off CouchSurfing, especially when the girl had obviously misunderstood the idea of surfing. One cannot simply just take, take and take. Whether one is surfing or hosting giving something back is always important. I believe that anyone who is willing to host a stranger expects something back from his/hers guest.

It is hard to find out how many people have tried the network and have been disappointed with the experience. Reasons for this may vary and if they can be counted as negative experiences can be speculated. Maybe the concept just did not suit their needs. It’s definitely not always like dancing on roses when one surfs but meeting new people was never meant to be a walk in a park. It takes a lot of energy to create a meaningful connection and no doubt there will be disappointments. It would be unreal if every surfer would enjoy each others company or in a matter of fact like one and other.

In June 2006 the CouchSurfing collective discussed on developing a stronger security network within the community. The plan was to have one or more (depending on the size of the city) emergency contact, a person who surfers could contact in the case of emergency or when needing assistance from a native. This plan was never put to action, but now, when the network is expanding more rapidly than anyone could have anticipated security issues will again raise their head and I hope that more emphasis will be paid on the security of surfers. I seem to differ from those who I have met, since the people I interviewed had no significant worries concerning security.

6.17 Meaningful connections

“CouchSurfing is not a dating site, but the sex is great”- said Tiina. This was a joke from her behalf but there is a hint of truth in it as well and it was no surprise that everyone I have met have a strong opinion regarding if it is acceptable to be dating the other members of the community. Many have found their soul mate through the site, and I for one can’t say there is nothing wrong with that, as long as the sex is not something that should be automatically part of the package.

Philippe heard that I was looking for CouchSurfing stories and he wanted to share his with me, after all, the site had changed his life drastically. Philippe was travelling in Sweden and he was looking
for a ride to Oulu through the site. Two girls offered him ride, but he was forced to turn down the offer, because of a schedule problems. However, few weeks later he met the same girl in Oulu. He recalls their first meeting in his mail; “If you are religious, you can say it was God who wanted this to happen. If you believe in faith, then it was just meant to happen. If you believe in horoscopes and the like, well, then the stars and planets were in the right formation at the moment. I personally don’t mind why or how it happened. It just happened and that is what counts. I met the girl of my dreams through the site” Philippe ended up spending rest of his trip in Oulu, whereas the girl later on moved to Belgium to do her Erasmus programme and at the time being. Now Philippe is studying Finnish and he intends to move here in July. They both plan to continue to use CouchSurfing- this time together. I suppose people fall for each others quite easily when they are travelling and there has always been some sort of sex factor when holidaying. As the saying goes holidays are mostly about Sex, sand and beach.

There have been CouchSurfing marriages, CouchSurfing babies and CouchSurfing affairs, divorces and one-night stands, the whole spectrum as to say. Maybe many hope that CouchSurfing will turn their life upside down and therefore are willing to invest so much on the strangers.

6.18 CouchSurfing conduct

There are as many styles to surf and host as there are members. Really there is no right or wrong way to do this as such. I have already told about the unwritten laws but everyone makes their own interpretations of even them. Some surfers want to spend every waking moment with their host, some want to adventure independently, some hosts cook five-star meals and some hosts expect the surfer to provide for him/herself. I suppose at the end of the day what truly counts is the fact that the surfer feels cared for and the host feels appreciated and that there simply is some good vibrations between the two.

It seems that one of the unwritten practises of CouchSurfing is to hug one another at the first meeting. This is a curious practise and I find it both intimidating and exhilarating. Complete strangers embracing one another like old friends, often changing kisses. Someone said to me that they hug their guests because they are their friends whom they just did not know yet and it is common practise to embrace a friend.
There is no selection process on how to become a couchsurfer. However, there are qualities that Couchsurfers should embody. The site states that a couchsurfer should understand that taking small risks can be a way of stimulating growth and positive change. A couchsurfer should be unafraid of meeting new people, and recognizing familiar qualities in complete strangers. Ideal Couchsurfers should also appreciate a willingness to learn and strive to never stop learning. It seems to be a lot to ask from one person. For me this acts as another proof that idealism and naivety has its part to play in CouchSurfing.

Lasse’s story in some way acts as evidence how one should never loose his/hers nerve, always smile and be polite. Be forgiving, be understanding and just enjoy the experience. This story from Amsterdam demonstrates how understanding people can be towards strangers, even when they are doing minor damage and causing a little bit of headache;

_Last summer we were travelling around Europe and we had for few weeks relied on Couchsurfer. We had decided that when we get to Amsterdam, we would stay in a hostel, `cos we wanted to stay out late and you know... just party a bit harder. However, we realised that we had no money to spare, so we posted a message on Amsterdam group and explained the situation. This Finnish girl who had just moved to Holland replied and said that she was more than happy to host us. So, we go to hers, it is really late when we arrive, something like midnight and we feel like we really crashing on her. Like, she has just moved in and everything and this Dutch guy is looking at us and we can see that he is thinking who on earth are these people? Anyway, they make us tea and we all go to the balcony to smoke a cigarette. The next scene is like from a movie, my friend is a last to come and he just takes the door and shuts is while our hosts flatmate shouts “Noooo!!” Turns out that the door is locked and none of us have a key. So basically we have been there about 10 minutes and we have managed to lock everyone out of the house. There were all ingredients that this would turn out to be the most embarrassing and awkward night for us ever. To top everything up I had broke down to a nervous laughter and our hosts started to loose their nerve. We managed to phone the police and eventually, after two or three hours they came and broke through the front door and opened the balcony door from inside. The door survived with minor damage and we apologised to them like a hundred times. They just happened to be such a cool people and they completely just laughed the whole incident of. We took funny pictures and even the neighbour came to see the silly_
imbeciles. I just think they had this talent to understand “natural and humane disasters”. Anyone else would have probably asked us to leave but not Alexander and Maija, they we stars. 8

6.19 Connection and communication

I wanted to know if people stay in-touch with each others after surfing or hosting. There was a very mixed response to my question. Some do dot stay in contact with each others, whereas some find close, intimate friends within the network. Many send so called group e-mails to people they have met and many use different internet arenas for their posts. It seemed that people genuinely are interested with the people they have met/hosted/surfed with, but that keeping the connection alive is either too time consuming or the connection fades away for other reasons. However, many try to keep the connection live and internet provides other forums for this.

I knew that many of us use the popular internet community, Facebook as a tool to stay in-touch with each others, at least in there one can learn what the others are up to; even when you don ´t send them personal messages. We “spy” on each others profiles and occasionally send messages via the facebook network. However within Facebook one can also join various groups devoted to CouchSurfing and couchsurfers. There one can search for new contacts and find possibly more information on surfers one might be interested to meet or surf with. Here one can also “hang out” with the old CouchSurfing buddies and or just to show their love and support towards CouchSurfing. To many it seems to be important that they Facebook profile states clearly “I am a Couchsurfer”, like it would be a large part of who they are, that being a Couchsurfers somehow defines them as individuals.

It crossed my mind to see if people were using also so called visual internet communities. The YouTube proved to be a popular venue among Couchsurfers. It too seems to act as a channel for communication. When doing a search, using CouchSurfing as a search term I came across with countless of video recordings. People have sent video posts, where they either express their thoughts on CouchSurfing or they have filmed short footages while surfing. This can be viewed in many ways. Video allows one to communicate with the whole CouchSurfing network as well as with the YouTube network. In one ways it almost read as an advertisement –both to the CouchSurfing network and for the individual surfer. I have already said that the competition, especially when looking for a place to stay in a popular city can be rough and each profile and

8 Translated by the author
request almost reads as curriculum vitae. Hence a short clip on YouTube could strengthen one’s possibilities when trying to stay at the head of the game.

I mentioned earlier that the rise of online social networks has been staggering. For example five hundred thousand people create a profile on My Space every week, Facebook and YouTube gets even more users each week. CouchSurfing too, has exploded; the number of new users is overwhelming. Hence, it seems that surfers have found use for Internet outside their beloved community. The different community networks within Internet have united and combined their strength.

Miller suggests that online and offline worlds penetrate each deeply and in complex ways, where people are using the Internet to realize older concepts of identity or to pursue new models of sociality (Miller; 2001; 82). Alex, acquaintance via CouchSurfing seems to agree with Miller. He said that Information technology and the emergence of social networks have had a great impact on his life. They had allowed him to systematically evaluate the experiences of everyone around me, to see what has worked and what hasn’t, what makes for a good, happy, worthwhile life and what doesn’t. It seems that the amount social networks will continue to grow as well as develop to new directions.

6.20 Other side of CouchSurfing

This is not the whole truth, it may even be a biased representation of a group of people who have chosen to enrich/ complicate their lives with CouchSurfing. The strong harmony that unites these people amazes me and I hope it will continue to do so in the years to come. However there seems to be dark clouds at the horizon, the expansions of the network seem to be too vast and rapid and everyone I interviewed agreed that this expansion will bring problems of all sort along with it. When I wrote my first piece on CouchSurfing there was 140 000 registered surfers, now the figure is over a million. This demonstrates how much the network has actually grown in a short time span.

Maybe travelling in the future will be preserved as followed; “Rules of the thumb; Do not plan your trips too long- the shorter the trip, the greater change of completing it, do not get emotionally attached to people you meet at the stopover. The less you care about them, the less it will cost you
to move on; Do not commit yourself too strongly to people, places, causes- you cannot know how long they will last or how long you will count them worthy of your commitment.” Many say that travelling is fantastic; but that it can be emotionally draining and certainly many friendships that I have created while on the road have been superficial. On the other hand, many decide to dedicate their life to travelling and periods spend away from home can be lengthy. This is the time when one has to bond with fellow travellers.

6.21 Touring the world

“The bottom line about ethnography is that is about forming relationships; it is about the search for connections within and across borders”

Behar

What exactly happens when one surfs? Every experience is unique but with the following examples and stories I can demonstrate to an outsider how the network functions. I wanted to include these stories, since they reveal the true ideology of the CouchSurfing movement better that any other form of data.

During the interviews I heard many stories that truly describe what CouchSurfing actually is like. These stories are spiced with appreciation, intimidation, funny facts and they really just illustrate that anything can happen while surfing.

For example, Tiina spoke very openly about her life. She talked about the difficulty of finding a balance within her life. On the other hand she has her childhood friends, who mostly live “ordinary family lives” and on the other she has her newfound CouchSurfing friends, friends who are adventurous and who fight against the norms. She said that she gets support from her CouchSurfing friends. They sort of reinforce her views on the world and the idea that not everyone was meant to settle down. On top of that they inspire her and teach her to view the world from different perspectives. She continued by saying that she is addicted to the warm and lovely feeling she gets from hosting. Tiina admits that she was very nervous when she, for example attended her first meeting. She was delighted that everyone was accepted as they were and neither she nor hopefully anyone would have to suffer from inferiority complex. Tuula describes CouchSurfing very fondly, she says that it has freed her, made her more open and more social.
Nam was a surfer who Mari spoke very fondly and who had surprised Mari most pleasantly. They had agreed that he would spend two days in Tampere, but his trip prolonged a bit. Her girlfriend had arranged the surfing and all that the girls really knew that a Vietnamese looking guy, with a very large backpack would arrive at some point. He was hitchhiking from Helsinki and could not really give a specific time. Eventually he wrote an e-mail that he was waiting for the girls by the tourist information centre. When hey got there he had disappeared. Later on, when going to a club they spotted a lost looking man by the railway station that fitted the bill. Susan then decided to go and ask weather he needed a place to sleep. Nam, at this point was looking very confused when Susan clarifies her question; Are you from CouchSurfing and are you meant to stay with us? As such the situation could almost be read that surfers are even willing to pick up total strangers from the streets. In travelling circles this however is not uncommon. Travellers can be picked up from bars, or when they are basking on the streets. Especially among the young people there is an almost transparent connection and helping one and other is rather common. TV shows, such as Madventures has thought travellers courtesy towards the locals when travelling and towards travellers who you might meet in your home base.

7.0 My life as a surfer

Hence this also reads as an autoethnography it was suggested that I would explain in more detail my own experiences and conduct as a surfer. So, how do I differ with the surfers I have met, interviewed and received e-mails from? How have I experienced the network, how I act within it and what have my personal experiences have been like? Matters of voice grew complicated during the writing process; I did not quite know where to place myself and how to portray my own experiences. I have told already about my own experiences and since it is partly an auto-ethnographic piece I have been reflecting my own experiences from a different perspective as well as I have been forced to this what kind of surfer I am in relation to others. I have been questioning my role within the community and I have been comparing my experiences to those who I have met/written to.

Firstly, I have had certain issues with the gender. I am more than happy to host surfers who are male, but I tend to send surfing requests to female surfers. Somehow it feels more secure and less awkward when surfing with another girl. Just as many others women I have talked with. For
instance, in Dublin I was forced to stay with a male host. Dublin is one of those places where it is extremely difficult to find a host. The city is extremely popular among travellers, backpackers and couchsurfers alike throughout the year. I send various requests when I was planning my stay and only at the last minute I received a positive answer from a young Argentinean man. The experience, after a rough start turned out to be extremely positive.

“It is nearly quarter past six. Where could he be? I have been waiting by the Dublin Sprite for nearly an hour and I’m getting anxious. I’m surrounded by people who all are waiting for someone, friends, lovers or parents. I am waiting for a complete stranger who is nearly an hour late. A man who does not answer his phone, a man who I last had contact via e-mail two days ago where he stated that he will finish work around 5pm and after that he will come and meet me. What a mess. I’m stuck. I have nowhere to go, all hostels are fully booked and I’m getting cold. CouchSurfing sucks I think. Out of nowhere young man appears, grinning and before I manage to re-act to him his arms are around me. What must we look like I think- no one would believe that we a complete strangers to one another. He picks up my bag and off we go. Quick stop at the supermarket, some wine and food and I sense that we have a great evening before us.”

It did not take me very long to realize that I had worried over nothing. My present for him melted his heart quickly and within no time we were deep in conversation. I had studied his profile and in it he had stated that he loves films by Aki Kaurismäki. I therefore gave him the latest film Kaurismäki had made on DVD. During the first evening he enthusiastically explains what I have to do when I Dublin. I spend a great day wondering around the city and in the evening I received a phone call from my host, who very kindly asks if I was interested in joining a party with him…

“Sorry, sorry we are late”, he shouts. We have come to meet some of my host friends at the Sprite where we continue to a dinner party. Now it was time to answer the routine like questions, where do you know him from? How long you have been friends with him? I shatter people’s perception when stating that I don’t really know him, we met online and he promised that I could sleep on his couch for few nights. I explain the principles of CouchSurfing and my audience looks rather bewildered. Why do you do it I hear them ask? Trusting a complete stranger, he could be a psychopath, aren’t you scared? I remember looking around the beautiful dining room where I was sitting and stating- because of experiences like this. Because of the privileges I gain when surfing, I don’t want to be stuck at some hostel with large crows of Americans and Australians. I want to meet locals and have a taste of their everyday life.
Ever since my visit to Dublin most of my hesitations concerning surfing with a male have somewhat disappeared and I am looking forward to new surfings, both with female and male surfers.

CouchSurfing has taught me a thing or two. Chris most certainly was a lesson that opened my eyes.

It’s getting late. I am not in the best of moods, I am tired and agitated. Definitely not up for this. Phone rings, it is time. I put on my coat and shoes- it is nearly midnight when I hurry towards the railway station. I know first impressions should not count, but in this case I have to say something. I have lived in United Kingdom for nearly 7 year and all that time I have tried to avoid the type that my surfer seems to represent. My guest was a bloke with a very short hair, dressed in a football top- a real tough northerner I thought to myself. I felt nervous, uneasy and anxious when exchanging kisses on the cheeks. After 5 minutes I know he likes beer and the band called Oasis. Why would I let him stay at mine? I must be mad.

Well stereotyping has never led into anything positive. He was fun, warm and friendly character that would not hurt a fly. We talked to extend of British class system, inequality and politics and he really affected my opinions and beliefs regarding certain issues. But this is why I value CouchSurfing so much. It gives me an opportunity to question myself and the world, I can learn through it, I can share my thoughts through it and most certainly I can make great friends through it. Later on when I found out that Chris himself would not host strangers, I could not help but feel a bit disappointment. I have felt that I took a big risk with him, when he in return was no interested in taking risks.

“Panic! What on earth am I going to do with him? He seems so different to me and I constantly worry how we manage to spend three days together. My god that is his fifth sandwich already, he will bankrupt me.”

When hosting surfers I have a tendency of going through various emotions and my head can be filled with most random thoughts. By no means is it easy to allow a stranger in you home. It is always complicated and emotional and I have often been ashamed of the thoughts that have sprung to my head when hosting. You need to be kind and friendly to you guests since you do not want to risk getting a negative reference. As a result, occasionally one has to pretend for selfish reasons,
however I believe it is the same in much you encounter in life, we have all forced to be courteous and polite to people whom we do not care too much. I have noticed a slight change in myself when I find myself more often saying no than yes to CouchSurfing request. I’m not absolutely certain if this is due to the circumstances in my life or if the network has worn me out.

These are just few examples from my life as a Couchsurfer. All and all, the community has had a major impact on my life. Outside the most obvious effects the greatest that I have felt concerns my self esteem and shyness. It is a tough spot when you meet your host for a first time in a strange country. You appreciate their generosity and hospitality and you think you own them an interesting stay. You desperately want them to like you, but at the same time you feel that you are not funny, interesting and intellectual enough. Maybe the previous surfer had been amazing and filled with stories I cannot top up or maybe they have left a bad taste and it is my job to clear up the mess. You never quite know what you are up against, but I have learnt to give my best shot and just be myself and hope for the best.
PART THREE

6.0 Conclusions and Future challenges

One always has to tread carefully in cyberspace. The person you have gotten to know via your computer screen can turn out to be completely different when encountering them in the real world. Taken this under consideration it is a somewhat miraculous that nothing serious has happened within the CouchSurfing community. I suppose this is because people genuinely feel so proud and so protective over their community. Over and over again the people I have met and interviewed have been genuinely excited and happy to be a member such a community. Those who are actively involved with the project also spend a lot of time other members, not only when surfing and hosting, but in gathering and meetings. Hence, CouchSurfing for many has taken a form of a local community even when it, for us all started as an online-community. For many, such as myself, CouchSurfing will always, mainly act as a travelling network and for many it may just be Internet community they once used when Inter-railing.

One could argue that CouchSurfing community is as much as a tribe as it is a community. Neo-tribes, according to Maffesoli, are social groups that temporarily are bond together in the midst of social uncertainty and disembeddedness (Richards; 204;124). We adventure across continents and unfamiliar places and once we meet we greet each others as if we were related because at least one aspect of your lifestyle bonds us together.

It seems that many who I have talked while writing this piece have left me feeling that there are people who really aim to make difference in the world within the network. Tiina for instance said that this was her way of fighting against all the evil in the world. Being part of the network, according to her is a way of saving the world, doing something good and worthwhile, and opportunity to show humanity. It might seem childish, but there is nothing wrong with it. For many CouchSurfing and Couchsurfers have restored their faith in humanity and at the same time being a member of the network has made themselves a somewhat better person. Of course many only find it a useful for their personal purposes and think nothing more of it.

The “other times”, moments on the road are cherished with such intensity that to many I have met, the desire to tour, the constant dream of travelling seems almost never-ending. I recall being very
sceptical when I first joined the network, I remember thinking that there is no way that this can function. When I started to dig deeper when doing this research I was almost hoping I could find some dirt, something that would make the network less “picture perfect”, but so far no aggravating evidence have surfaced.

CouchSurfing itself is a modern tool which can be harnessed to the use of travelling. With it money, capital, ideas, images, information, objects and more so people cross cultural and national borders. The way people move, the way we shift space, the way we push and explore the boundaries between “us,” the tourists and “them,” the native citizens, has become a fascinating and quickly changing phenomenon and sensory experiences have become more valuable than material values.

I was reading about these two men, who were pen pals in the 1950’s. A Canadian man had placed an advertisement in a Finnish paper, where he was looking for a pen pal from Finland. These two wrote to each others and few years after the first letter, the Finnish man decided to visit his pen pal friend. I suppose CouchSurfing is not so different, there has always been adventurous people, travelling has always been a dream of most of us and Internet has offered more vast and more versatile venue for interaction. On some level society has also changed. Communities can feel like a thing from a past and strangers are perceived somewhat dangerous. An American surfer stated; “in this country, the very idea of opening your home to a stranger is anathema to most people—perhaps for good reason”. However, there are still plenty of people in whose opinion the rewards of hosting and surfing are far greater than the risks. I was reading about this rather exceptional Belgian family who have, with their five young children hosted over 200 surfers. They do this because they believe that is very important that their children to grow up in a world where there is respect for difference. They say that “You can teach your children to be respectful and open and social or you can show it.” Home was loved by everyone who I met, but it was regarded as an open space, where friends, visitors and even strangers are welcomed. And at the end of the day the strangers were not so strange, since they belong to the same community. My first CouchSurfing hosts decided a year ago to let go of their home and sell their belongings. They have now couchsurfed every day since they made that decision and what they were saying is that they don’t think themselves as someone who don’t have a home, they might not have a flat or house, but in return they have stayed with over 200 people who have given them a home. In fact such a good home that they are not in a hurry to become hosts any time soon.
We live in a very “Me” orientated world and to have people who are willing to go such lengths for strangers cannot be a bad thing. The desire to for belonging to cosmos and expensing social networks seems to be a task that many have taken to extremes, some via other Internet networks such as MySpace and Facebook, others through CouchSurfing. These virtual campsites seem to be in the core of the post-modern communities and it seems that they are viewed, at least by those who use them as intimate and valid meeting places. Internet and the various networks in where communities gather have granted a voice with which they can participate in the world. As Bauman has argued postmodern societies are born because of the insecurities of postmodern world. They are often imagined communities, which are held together by the belief of community member that their community matters (1996; 38-39).

It seems that from any point you look at CouchSurfing it must sound bizarre- to meet the people who you find through a website. It may seem that there is just no “real” connection. You just get a glimpse of the person via the site. It is up to the individual surfers then to decide how to proceed and how far those relations can be taken. Maybe for many having fun is the most important part of CouchSurfing and everything else is just a side product. But as Urry argues, creating a global identity seems to be utmost important to many and world is seen as an arena, where one can freely roam depending on their preferences (Urry; 2000, 14-16).

CouchSurfing is a social network and as said it can be used for various purposes. The network has proven to be a valuable tool for those who have moved temporarily and permanently to another country. Many use the network for flat, job and most obviously friend hunting. For example, Claudio, an Italian man turned Finnish has built almost him whole social network in Finland through CouchSurfing. He is now known by everyone, if not personally by his reputation. Santos, who I interviewed for this piece is also building his new life in Tampere mainly through the network. For example he has found surfers to go to gigs with; surfers who guide him with Finnish authorities and surfers who help him with finding used furniture.

So at the end I would argue that CouchSurfing is a way of travelling in which travellers seek to encounter events with special meaning for their personal life. It is rather staggering to realize that when I started studying CouchSurfing in more detail there were 66037 surfers, when the figure today (September 2009) is nearly one and half million. This, new, intimate tourism, that is based in hospitality and generosity has skyrocketed in the heart of modern tourism. People spend more and more time on travelling and on the other hand less and less of money.
What we are experiencing here is not only the individual’s desire to experience the private space, the “home”, but a need to experience another human. The Couchsurfing mechanism provides users with the immediate emotional exchange they are yearning for and with the overwhelming rise in the number of the surfers guarantees that there is plenty of possibilities to experience a strange person, in a new setting. However, I cannot but wonder how many of the new surfers are willing to invest so much time and energy to the project than those pioneers who have been the heart and soul of the community. And I fear that the system can be easily abused when the number of users is simply too staggering to handle. The future will be challenging. Keeping the community open while stopping those pioneers leaving and starting smaller, competitive and closed network societies will be a major task. Putnam has asked an important question that CouchSurfing will also have to try to answer, if the entry and the exit are too easy will commitment, trustworthiness and reciprocity suffer and the community will stop developing? (Putnam; 2000; 177).

Regrettably, just as I was finishing this piece I found rather devastating news regarding safety within the network. It was bound that some sinister characters would find the network eventually, but unfortunately it happened sooner rather than later. On 5 March 2009, a 29 year-old female member from Hong Kong travelled to Leeds in UK, and was hosted by a 34 year-old Moroccan national. The female alleged she was raped with threat of violence. She left the host next day and informed the police. Police arrested the host and the latter was charged with rape and sexual assault. The trial commenced on 11 August 2009. The victim in this case had stayed at strangers’ homes, including with single men, in the UK and other European countries without incident before meeting the defendant. The accused denied the two counts of rape and one of sexual assault, however he was subsequently found guilty and jailed for 10 years⁹. I am surprised that there has been so little discussion regarding this assault on the CouchSurfing webpage and wikipedia. It is unfortunate that when travelling, backpacking and CouchSurfing women face much greater risk of violence and harassment and news of backpacker murders and rapes are no longer that rare.

Many have criticised travelling as an elitist privilege and to some extend it is so. CouchSurfing however has proven that travelling is available for everyone who is a bit adventurous. Large sums of money are not necessarily needed when using the network- free accommodation, company for hitchhiking and tips for free events and as discussed it is also an excellent way to explore one’s homeland. The fact is that tourism today is experiencing a great fragmentation, and moreover, it is

⁹ [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1205794/Rape-horror-tourist-used-couchsurfing-website-aimed-travellers.html#ixzz0geTEWvT](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1205794/Rape-horror-tourist-used-couchsurfing-website-aimed-travellers.html#ixzz0geTEWvT)
starting to take on new meaning and purpose for each individual traveler. Motivations to tour, to shift space, are growing and constantly being reinvented which, one can argue, is a direct result of modernity. Bianski argues that interaction with strangers was not a primary motivation of tourism prior to modernity. Hence, the motivations of tourists have become fragmented, causing division within the whole discipline of tourism itself.

Cyberspace in particular is imagined as a window on the world, a leisure space where travellers can roam the world without ever leaving their home. The notion of cyber tourism reveals the imagined potential of the Internet for virtual mobility and playful activity, with metaphors such as "surfing" the information "superhighway" underlining the centrality of travel, mobility and leisure to our conception of cyberspace. Most seem to be happy with virtual travel, whereas others, such as the people I have discussed with have decided to take a leap of faith. They have decided to be part of the tribe that could be called as global nomads. They have decided that the world is an arena, where they can freely move depending on their preferences and while doing so they create a global identity, which they have build by exchanging cultures, habits and languages with other surfers. That leap has enriched their lives in ways I could have not imagined when I started this piece.

**Finale**

As for me- My thoughts now run wild on my future travels. When on the road I am practically putting my hopes of survival on the hospitality of strangers. CouchSurfing, Woofing and hitchhiking will be at the heart of my travels and even after this study I can’t help but feeling a little intimidated and nervous. I have heard amazing travel accounts and I have witnessed the generosity and open heartlessness myself, but at the end of the day there really is no guarantees that all will run smoothly when surfing. Finally, I would therefore argue that CouchSurfing truly is an enigma, a riddle that appears to be different for every user. All I can hope now is that it will show its gentle face to me during my next adventure. For me the next step within CouchSurfing is hopefully to learn to sail with fellow surfers in Poland, where a local sailor has thought those interested to sail for years free of charge. How much better can it get?
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