Degree Project

Master in Tourism Destination Development

Couchsurfing

An understanding of the hosts' willingness to offer accommodation free of charge to relative strangers

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Abstract

The aim of the research was to get a better understanding of why one might be a couch surfing host. The focus of this study is the general concept of the Couchsurfing platform which has created the possibility for travelers from all over the world, to offer or to request (or both) hospitality free of charge. As a part of a qualitative study, online interviews were held with six hosts located in different countries around the world. The findings of the data gathered while conducting the research, give an insight of how people choose their potential guests, how they negotiate trust along with what is the that they gain out of sharing the privacy of their homes with 'strangers'.

Keywords: Couchsurfing, hospitality exchange, reciprocity, sharing, sharing economy, trust

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1. Introduction

Modern technology has eliminated distances and has given the opportunity to people to keep in touch with friends and relatives or make purchases anywhere in the world. In some cases, technology has enabled people to share their own homes via web based platforms, which share similar values, such as Couchsurfing, TalkTalkBnB, Trustroots, Warmshowers and BeWelcome. So, rather than a distant relative from overseas staying on the couch in the spare room, private spaces are now opened up to complete strangers. However, this has encouraged me to explore how one can trust another over internet based interactions and especially why would an individual share the privacy of their home with a person with whom they have never met before in the real world.

It is undeniable that hospitality is a combination of services offered and as it is described by Lugosi (2008), hospitality is an industry that includes commercial organizations that provide not only accommodation, but also, food and drink, through a voluntary human exchange. The main purpose of providing hospitality to others is to preserve and/or to enhance the mutual well-being of the parties involved (Lugosi, 2008).

Today many of us live in a world that has been suggested as constantly 'on the move'. Additionally many of us are increasingly relying on networking technologies and social media to coordinate togetherness (Molz, 2012). Subsequently, the overall use of Internet has influenced the way tourism operates in many ways (Chen, 2012). It has created new possibilities of social networking, which led to the spread of online communities (i.e. Trustroots.org, BeWelcome.org) over the past years, giving the opportunity to a great number of people to form groups and make personal connections with individuals around the world sharing the same interests and activities (Lauterbach et al., 2009).

Such communities allow their members to interact, to exchange goods and services between individuals who do not know one another (Lauterbach et al., 2009). Given this, the risk for such kind of interactions and transactions is potentially greater than the offline relationships (Lauterbach et al., 2009). Consequently, being able to trust one another is of great importance for users of the platform, in order to decide with whom they will have encounter (Lauterbach et al., 2009; Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015).

The focus of this thesis was to explore the reason why would an individual go through the process of offering free accommodation to a traveler. In order for the purpose to be achieved, the online community of Couchsurfing was chosen to obtain the data needed for the research. The platform of Couchsurfing is based on the use of social networking tools and it has become the most popular hospitality exchange network between global travelers and local hosts on the web that offer non-commercial accommodation options (Decrop et al., 2018; Chen, 2017; Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015); relying on the reciprocity of members to keep on exchanging visits (Lauterbach et al., 2009). Although originally the concept of the platform was to simply offer free accommodation to any person who would ask for it (O'Regan, 2013).

The interpersonal communication that takes place between its members on the platform is based on sending couch-requests and the reputation the platform carries (Chen, 2017; Bialski & Batorski, 2009). Its reputation helps to build mutual understanding between potential surfers and hosts, and also, online-trust which is the key factor in such kind of hospitality exchange (Chen, 2017; Bialski & Batorski, 2009). As that form of travel develops, the use of the term 'couch surfing' is related to a specific way of seeking private accommodation to the destination of choice; where requesting from people who live at the place of interest, for a place to stay with the ultimate goal of engaging with the host or owner of the property (Chen, 2017).

Couchsurfing, as an online platform is a project started in 2004 by founders Casey Fenton, Daniel Sebastian Le Tuan and Leonardo Bassani da Silveira (Couchsurfing.com, 2018). The idea was born by a group of students in Iceland through an e-mail that it was sent to them, and suggested that people anywhere in the world 'would want to share their homes with strangers' (Couchsurfing.com, 2018). The platform turned out to be a profitable one when by 2011 profits were being made through profile verification and website advertisements (Couchsurfing.com, 2018).

The organization currently suggests it has more than 12 million members in more than 200,000 cities around the world comprising a community which uses the platform. The members of this community support the concept of 'share your life' and build connections with people from all over the world (Couchsurfing.com, 2018). Moreover, the members function either as hosts or guests (or both) and they act by following the main concept of the community, which is to provide accommodation free of charge to

travelers or surf themselves and experience each place from their host's view and gain a more genuine side of a place (Cova & White, 2010; Molz, 2013).

Couchsurfing is a peer-to-peer platform where the practices that take place are a combination of sharing and exchanging tangible and intangible goods and services (Cova & White, 2010; Molz, 2013; Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015; Geiger & Germelmann, 2015). However, users are firstly required to create a profile on the platform, through which they can make a listing where they will describe in words and by the use of pictures, the free place they are offering to stay. The profile is also mandatory when a user wants to contact potential hosts requesting accommodation (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015).

When couch surfing, people share not only their time, space, items but they also take part in other forms of collaborative consumption, such as lending, swapping or exchanging goods without using any financial compensation for that purpose (Botsman & Rogers, 2010 as it is cited in Geiger & Germelmann, 2015). The members communicate with one another and usually they are people that are relative strangers within the platform. Trust is required to be built in the online world and then it is transferred into the real world (Luo & Zhang, 2016; Lampinen, 2016).

The community of the platform, as it is cited on its webpage, promotes itself by pointing out the idea of sharing one's life, travelling the world, rediscovering one's city and becoming a host to a traveler; while at the same time, the individuals take part in the process of creating meaningful connections with each other, being kind, staying curious and open to new cultures (Couchsurfing.com, 2018). Similarly, as it is stated by Cova and White (2010), people engage in such performances in order to meet new people, to create friendships and to get to know new cultures and languages. It is also a way to communicate information, give advices, share stories and cultural beliefs (Rosen et al., 2011).

According to past research, couch surfers tend to visit places that generate the authentic traveler experience and usually they are not on the map of the most common tourist destinations. As authenticity is perceived from the travelers, where they are after something that according to the modern notion of the term exists elsewhere and it can be experienced only through traveling (Uriely et al., 2002). The overall experience of a surfer is perceived to have a greater value than the traditional accommodation, since

they describe the experience as a more authentic one, more community-oriented and more active (Cova & White, 2010). Travelers like them, can be viewed as people pursuing local lifestyle experiences, while wanting to meet and to get in touch with residents of a destination, so as to experience the feeling of belonging to a group (Larsen et al., 2011; Decrop et al., 2018).

Additionally, according to a survey conducted by Bialski (2009, as it is cited in Decrop et al., 2018), where individuals between the age of 18 to 29 years old took part in and agreed to the fact that the reasons for choosing couch surfing resulted in self-development and self-renewal. The platform of Couchsurfing has become part of the worldwide accommodation market creating lots of diversities where establishments around the world continue to redefine their image by creating and demonstrating themes for a more authentic experience (Cova & White, 2010). In this respect, the platform promotes authenticity over traditional tourism products and landscapes. Seeking authenticity through the participation to the daily life of the locals, or the ones that are located at the destination of interest, while staying at other couch surfers' homes; making it the biggest differential point among the traditional accommodation (Cova & White, 2010).

Last but not least, people who engage into web communities like the platform of Couchsurfing may be driven from several factors; such as financial crisis, the increasing ecological concerns, or the psychological satisfaction of being part of a collaborative initiative, could be the main drivers of the growth of these communities (Decrop et al., 2018).

1.2 Research Rationale

The research gap that is going to be examined here is how people negotiate trust about individuals they have never met before, and decide to host them and give them access to their property.

1.3 Research Aim

The **aim** of the research is to explore why a host shares their private space with a 'stranger'.

1.4 Research Question

Why would an individual be interested in offering accommodation free of charge to an unknown guest in the context of tourism?

1.5 Structure of the thesis

This chapter has focused upon the online community of the platform of Couchsurfing and its voluntary exchange of hospitality. The following chapter, the literature review, has its focus on the discussion of key concepts used in the thesis. This includes for example the idea of hospitality as more than just an industry; the role of reciprocity within the context of hospitality and how trusting one another can affect the relationships of the people who engage into hospitality exchange networking. In chapter three the discussion turns to methodologies and methods used to obtain data. Chapter four has its focus on the findings and discussion, where the data gathered are described and discussed thoroughly with the support of theory. The final chapter turns to conclusion, where a summary of the main parts of the whole thesis is modified according to the data gathered while conducting the research.

2. Literature Review

Over the last years, concepts such as sharing, swapping, and bartering are emerging and have become part of one's daily life as a different way of accessing or sharing events in various forms or physical goods, services and domestic spaces (Albinsson & Yasanthi, 2012; Lampinen, 2016; Decrop et al., 2018). These alternative practices of consumption have an increasing impact on many industries and one of them is the accommodation sector (Decrop et al., 2018). Developments in contemporary digital media have contributed to that matter, giving the opportunity to individuals around the world to transform the relationship they have with social networks and larger communities (Rosen et al., 2011).

In this chapter, the main concept that will be observed is couch surfing and the concepts related to that, which is the concept of *hospitality*, *reciprocity*, *sharing* and *sharing economy*. The concept of *trust* is key and transpires through all digital platforms, like Couchsurfing. Finally, *motives* that could drive someone *to share* the privacy of their homes with strangers, will be examined and *decision – making process* of doing so.

2.1 Hospitality

Hospitality, as a concept, has become more well-known from the ancient and classical worlds (500 BC - 500 AD) and especially its link to the Greek and Roman civilizations (O'Gorman, 2007). Many words that are used nowadays to describe hospitality are evolved from the same "Proto-Indo-European root 'ghos-ti' which means: stranger, guest, and host, properly someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality" (Bloom, 2004, p.180; O'Gorman, 2005).

The Greek languages also developed from the same Proto-Indo-European base; the word 'ghos-ti' gave the Greek word 'ξένιος' which means: foreigner, guest, host or stranger (Tylor, 1871; O'Gorman, 2005). Furthermore, hospitality "represents a kind of guaranteed reciprocity – one protects the stranger in order to be protected from him" (Muhlmann, 1932, as it is cited in O'Gorman, 2005, p.142).

In Greek mythology, hospitality played significant role in people's lives, because it is believed that gods used to protect strangers; with god Zeus to be the one associated with hospitality (Tylor, 1871; Wilson, 2013). The identity of the guest or their status in

life were not of great significance, the hospitality they would receive, would be the same given to a stranger as the one given to a god (O'Gorman, 2005). The main reason behind this was the fact that anyone asking for hospitality could be Zeus, "the god of gods" and consequently, the more they offered to their guest, the greater the measure of acceptableness to the god (Tylor, 1871, p.321).

Similarly as it is stated by Wilson (2013), the relationship between a host and a guest is highly valuable in Greek culture that it was even entrusted to the next generation of the ones they had formed a guest-friendship. In other words, if a person's father had formed a guest-friendship with another man, the son could expect hospitality, or exchange gifts, from the same household even if the original hosts had passed away (Wilson, 2013).

Apart from the occasion where the individuals had already formed a friendship, when the time to meet with a stranger would take place and in order to form a friendly relationship, they would have to engage into sharing food and exchanging gifts (Wilson, 2013). The guest could not insult their host or demand what it is not offered to them freely by the host or even refuse to accept what it is offered to them. Hosts also could not insult their guest in any possible way or not be hospitable or protect their guest; turning a guest away could be considered as disrespect by the Greek community (Wilson, 2013). Likewise, as it is mentioned by Telfer (2001), it is the host's task to make sure his/her guest is happy during their stay, not bored or miserable and his/her needs in food, drink and shelter have been fully covered.

It is undeniable that humans spend much time of their lives being in public, which makes it look like a natural part of people's lives (Jacobson, 2010). In other words, Jacobson (p.219) supports that humans are undoubtedly "public beings" and tend to act independently in the community, but in order to do so in a "shared space", they have first successfully done the same at their homes. In this vein, it should be pointed out the essence of 'home' and as it is described by Lynch (2005), 'home', apart from the building itself, it has a physical essence filled with emotional moments and cultural characteristics that derive from the personality traits of the person/persons who live in it. Home is "a familiar – personal territory" (Jacobson, 2010, p.219).

Then, according to Telfer (2001), 'hospitality' could be linked to 'home', where the meaning of it lies on offering food, drink and sometimes accommodation to people

who are not standard members of a household. All of the commodities that hosts may have in their own homes, they end up sharing not only them, but also their personal space with their guests (Telfer, 2001). This idea of hospitality for the business world, or else commercial hospitality, is translated into sold hospitality, where money exchange take place while providing food and drink to visitors. However, the main idea of hospitality remains; sharing one's home and provision with others. In other words, a host is responsible for the overall prosperity of their guest (Telfer, 2001).

The same author points out her argument distinguishing the real sense of hospitality in one's private home and the false commercial imitation of it; where people are not driven by the pure interest for their guest, but they are mainly driven by the guests' welfare, since these guests are not chosen and their satisfaction from the overall hospitality will bring a rise in the income of the business (Telfer, 2001).

However, 'home' should be distinguished from commercial homes, where they would be the type of accommodation where guests have to pay in order to stay in private homes (Lynch, 2005; Telfer, 2001). The amount of interaction between the guest and the host or the family, usually takes place in a 'public' space of the premises, where 'public' means the shared space. Therefore, commercial homes include a variety of accommodation types, like small hotels, bed and breakfasts (B&Bs), and host family accommodation (i.e. guesthouses, lodging houses), which means that at the same time, people share their privacy, commercial and social settings (Lynch, 2005). A 'bed and breakfast' type of accommodation offers a homelike setting with breakfast included, but with monetary exchange (Zane, 1997). However, a self-catering cottage might also be considered as a commercial home, although the hosts or family do not share the same premises. However, the fact that the home belongs to someone else is vivid, since everything that the guests use, belong to the home owners (Lynch, 2005).

Similar to the characteristics of hospitality that were discussed above, nowadays there are some cultures where a 'tourist' can also be seen as a 'guest' and consequently, the hosts of the community are obliged to extend the generosity to the visitor (Berno, 1999). All in all, it could be argued that the idea of couch surfing could be based on this version of hospitality.

2.2 Reciprocity

Reciprocity can be described as a set of rules and obligations where the give and take pattern is based on, establishing "moral standards of social solidarity" (Giesler, 2006, p.284); creating viability and vitality of the society in which they are part of (Giesler, 2006). People back in the days, used to repay gifts when they received one even from a complete stranger, rewarding kind actions or even punishing the unkind ones (Fehr & Gächter, 2000; Falk & Fischbacher, 2006). As it is described by Van Baal (1975, as it is cited in Sherry, 1983, p. 158), the gift has been perceived as an "invitation to partnership and as a confirmation of the donor's sincere participation in a recipient's tribulations and joys". In other words, gifts could be described as a tangible way of expressing social relationships since the value of the gift –to a great extent– depends on the nature of the relationship one wants to create (Sherry, 1983).

However, Sherry (1983) also argues that not only tangible objects can be granted as gifts, but also services or experiences could be considered as gifts depending the occasion and the social relationship. Through the act of giving and receiving, a norm of reciprocity can be developed (Sherry, 1983), since, as it was described by Komter (2005), receiving gifts can create feelings of thankfulness and dependence.

"Reciprocity is a powerful determinant of human behavior and acts as a response to acts that can be perceived as kind or unkind and they also comprise both distributional fairness and fairness intentions" (Falk & Fischbacher, 2006, p.294). According to the research conducted by Falk and Fischbacher (2006), concluded that reciprocity is intention driven. Moreover, reciprocity can be divided into 'direct' and 'indirect' (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005). Where there is direct reciprocity, it can be described as an act of altruism between two individuals where the outcome is both to obtain net profit (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005). The context of indirect reciprocity presumes that individuals meet randomly and one has the role of the giver and the one has the role of receiver. These roles tend to change and individuals experience both roles, but this change of roles often takes place with different partner each time (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005).

Gouldner (1960) describes the concept of reciprocity as a "vital principle of society and a key intervening variable through which shared social rules are enabled to yield social stability" (Gouldner, 1960, p.161). In other words, reciprocity as it is characterized by the same author is the basis on which the ethical and social life of all

societies presumably rests (Gouldner, 1960). Similarly, reciprocity could be described as a response to friendly actions, since people tend to act accordingly to the people's actions they encounter with (Fehr & Gächter, 2000). However, the term reciprocity differs in repeated interactions since future material benefits are expected from such act, rather than having the meaning of cooperative or retaliatory behavior. In other words, "uninvited favors" are more likely to create a sense of obliging people to repay the "psychological debt" (Fehr & Gächter, 2000, p.161).

Overall, while engaging in the act of sharing, there is a possibility for a lack or reciprocity to exist, where none of the individuals pay attention to the balance between giving and receiving (Belk, 2009); since, as it is pointed out by Fehr and Gächter (2000), human beings tend to be mainly self-interested. In general though, the term reciprocity is used when givers and receivers do not plan to keep accounts of the goods that have been shared (Belk, 2007).

On the other hand, as it is mentioned above, there are people who appear to have more altruistic behavior than others. The altruistic behavior can be described as the behavior that benefits another individual, not closely related even when the situation may be harmful for the person performing the behavior (Trivers, 1971). Consequently, it is worth pointing out the fact that many people deviate from self-interested behavior in a reciprocal manner; keeping in mind that the benefits of reciprocity depend on the inequality of the altruistic act (Trivers, 1971; Fehr & Gächter, 2000).

More specifically, in the case of Couchsurfing, the platform, as Lauterbach et al. (2009) stated, it shows great deal of direct and generalized reciprocity but also reputation systems have enhanced the overall activity of the platform. These reputation systems include characteristics such as "physical verification", "personal references" and "vouching" (Lauterbach et al., 2009, p.346). Vouching among users of the platform, gives the opportunity to the users to acknowledge specific friends as trustworthy. The users must obtain at least three vouchers in order to be able to vouch for other users on the platform as well (Lauterbach et al., 2009).

2.3 Sharing & Sharing Economy

Although the essence of sharing is marked by altruistic motives, there are some cases where the act of sharing is independent from individual motives and a direct

reciprocity (i.e. a form of fee) is there to accommodate the idea of sharing (Bucher et al., 2016). Nevertheless, as Aigrain (2012) stated, sharing could be described as an act of making something available to others. Belk (2007, p.1596), supports the idea that sharing is an "alternative to the private ownership" that is used in marketplace and gift giving. Rather than dividing what could be defined as "mine" and "yours", sharing describes something as "ours" (Belk, 2007, p.1596). More specifically, sharing is a voluntary act of lending and authorized use of property. Belk (2009) also mentions that the gift giving is a reciprocal act and a key characteristic of human social life.

Belk (2014, p.1595), also argues that "sharing is a phenomenon as old as human kind", the act of sharing is characterized as an altruistic act intended as kindness to others. Through altruism one gives himself/herself up for the whole while at the same time, in sharing, one, embraces the whole within themselves (Ingold, 1986). It is undeniable that refusing to provide someone with directions to a nearby location, or the time of the day, can be described as rudeness (Belk, 2014). However, the act of sharing is more likely to take place within family and people we are familiar with rather than strangers. The act of sharing with other people makes the recipient a part of "pseudo-family" and it can be characterized as "sharing in" (Belk, 2014, p.1596; Ingold, 1986).

However, when sharing takes place among relatively strangers it can be described as "sharing out" (Belk, 2014, p.1596). In other words, when sharing takes place, ownership is transferred and reciprocal exchange is involved in both cases of gift giving and marketplace exchange, with no debt to be collected for such act. Consequently, borrowing or lending are acts of sharing that can create a small bond between the people who are involved in such acts (Belk, 2014; Chen, 2008).

Terms like "open sharing" can be used in the case of providing accommodation to a guest at an individual's private home; implying that they can use all the rooms in the house, take their food, without necessarily asking for permission, in contrast with the family members who take these privileges for granted. The term "open sharing" involves "sharing in" and it does not take place among strangers (Belk, 2014, p.1596).

During the past years the peer-to-peer networks have emerged, giving the chance to people to select and use "underutilized inventory" through free-based sharing (Zervas et al., 2017, p.687; Fraiberger & Sundararajan, 2015). Such platforms are collectively known as 'sharing economy' (i.e. Airbnb, Uber, etc.) (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015;

Hamari et al., 2016; Zervas et al., 2017). The platform of Couchsurfing is undeniably an example of the sharing economy since in some cases the idea of couch surfing leads to more personal acts than simply sharing one's premises (Geiger & Germelmann, 2015).

As stated by Hamari et al. (2016), the concept of sharing economy refers to "the peer-to-peer-based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online services" (p.2047). The sharing economy is an economic-technological phenomenon that it depends on information developments and communications technology. As a result, it has increased consumer's awareness of collaborative web communities and social sharing (Hamari et al., 2016). In other words, sharing economy supports the concept of using online platforms in order to share the consumption of goods and services (Hamari et al., 2016; Möhlmann, 2015).

2.4 Trust

In concepts like sharing when couch surfing occurs, trust is also important since it is basic feature on which cooperation and mutuality are determined by (Zaltman & Moorman, 1988). Trust arises from principles like ethics and morality which are based on agreements, conscious or unconscious, in order to provide mutual benefits (Arrow, 1974). When there is mutual trust, the relationships tend to be more prosperous than the cases when trust is absent (Arrow, 1974).

In other words, trust is having the expectation that the word or a promise given by another individual will be held. However, trust has to flow in two directions otherwise it cannot exist as one sided act of behavior (Zaltman & Moorman, 1988). In addition to that, Uslaner (2002, p.1) defines the word 'trust' as the mean that "brings us all sorts of good things – from willingness to get involved in our communities to higher rates of economic growth, to making daily life more pleasant". As it is stated by the same author, trust has a moral dimension that plays a significant role in forms of engagement that bind the individual to a larger community (Uslaner, 2002). By trusting another person, means that the individual allows to himself/herself to be vulnerable expecting positive actions from others (Riegelsberger et al., 2003).

The word 'trust' is used in people's daily lives and everyone refers to the term by giving a slightly different meaning to it (Riegelsberger et al. 2003). Berg et al. (1995)

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refer to trust as the most significant characteristic of a social system. Subsequently, trust can be described as an essential behavioral attribute that affects behavior and the process of decision making. However, it is possible that in some cases the concept of 'trust' will be absent or it may be superseded by the individual's capability of making self-interested decisions (Berg et al. 1995).

Johnson and Grayson (2003) stated that cognitive trust is the main characteristic that could enhance the customer's willingness to rely on a service provider's reliability. However, as it is argued by the same authors, cognitive trust is accumulated through knowledge, observation of someone's behavior within the focal relationship or the reputation one has from other relationships one has formed. When the influence of the reputation is strong, initial interactions might be characterized as opportunities to either confirm or disconfirm prior perceptions (Johnson & Grayson, 2003).

Nevertheless, Riegelsberger et al. (2003) conducted a research on computer-mediated communication and the way users evaluate trustworthiness and establish trust in each other while communicating via a computer; and concluded that mediated interactions carry an increased risk since the users cannot see each other face-to-face. Hence, computer-mediated communication requires a more "priori trust than face-to-face interaction" (Riegelsberger et al., 2003, p.760). Consequently, as the face-to-face-encounters have been replaced by the communication technologies, the risk of maximizing the low-trust interactions has been increased (Riegelsberger et al., 2003).

Regarding the nature of the platform of Couchsurfing, Luo and Zhang (2016) stated that, due to its nature, members' trust is first formed in a virtual world and then is transferred to the offline world, where they meet in real life. However, interacting with other individuals involve higher risks, as a consequence, a higher level of trust is required to make the offline interactions happen (Luo & Zhang, 2016). The system of vouching for certain members of the platform, forms a circle of trust since not everyone can vouch for a specific user and it is accessible only to small amount of users. The purpose of that system is to provide members with additional information that one can be based on them for choosing another member either as his/her host or his/her surfer (Lauterbach et al., 2009). Furthermore, in order a member's account to be verified, they need to pay a certain fee, although such act is optional, it is a way to increase trust among users. References and ratings of the hosting or surfing experience, however, are the feedback that is left by members on others' profiles (Lauterbach et al., 2009).

A research conducted by Bialski and Batorski (2009), pointed out that the people most likely to participate in the Couchsurfing platform are the ones who might share similar political views, the same views of the world, friendships, trust and same views of travel. Moreover, people who are members of such community are supporters of the idea that people are inherently good natured (Bialski & Batorski, 2009). The feeling of trust is enhanced by the ability to self-select the surfers or the hosts, making trust as a feeling between the members of the community even stronger. The sense of fear tends to be absent when someone decides to surf and a feeling of 'home' in a foreign destination, takes place (Bialski & Batorski, 2009; Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015). Consequently, the act of couch surfing can be considered a part of the mobile world where technologies support different forms of travel and that lead to different relationships and human interactions in general; having an impact on people's worldview and the information they choose to exchange (Chen, 2017).

2.5 Motives to Share

A motive can be defined as "an internal factor that arouses, directs, and integrates behavior" (Larsen et al., 2011, p.692).

For a host, in the sense of the hospitality that described above, the motive can be divided into the desire to please others in terms of generally being friendly or expressing real concern and compassion; driven from the motive to meet the guests' needs (Telfer, 2001). Moreover, in some cases, a person's motives might not derive from reciprocal purposes, meaning that vanity, being the motive, where the desire to benefit hosts – themselves– arises as a need to be covered rather than satisfying the guests' needs (Telfer, 2001).

Furthermore, there are also self-interested motives where offering hospitality is a way to seduce or manipulate the potential guest through the pleasure of hospitality; such act, however, do not apply to genuine hospitable people. Lastly, in non-commercial homes, motives that show genuine hospitality are those in which concern for the guests' welfare is predominant, or where hosts and guests aim at a free exchange of hospitality for mutual enjoyment and benefit (Telfer, 2001).

More specifically, the platform of Couchsurfing, as it has been pointed out, fosters hospitality that is offered with no financial compensation but it is mainly based on a

generalized reciprocity within the members of the community (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015).

The motives that drive individuals to participate in the online community of Couchsurfing, create positive value that are similar to those found in other communities created around open-source brands (Cova & White, 2010). The pleasant feeling that the members get through meaningful encounters the hospitality-network has to offer could be described as the main reason that drives people to participate in the platform (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015). Such feeling derives from the fact that hosts, often try to select their potential guests based on the traits that would make them similar to the hosts' traits. According to a past research conducted by Ikkala and Lampinen (2015), the main motives, as divided into themes, are the sense of 'sociability', 'selectivity', and 'control'.

People who decide to engage in the community may be characterized as "outsiders" to the rest of society, but they consider themselves "different" (Bialski & Batorski, 2009, p.183). Such need can be satisfied through enjoyable or inspiring moments; hosts share with previously unfamiliar people from around the world and engage in intriguing conversations with them (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015). Most of the times, people who choose to enroll in the platform are the ones who do not want to be static; they feel the need to meet new people and to feel connected with another person (Bialski & Batorski, 2009).

As it is stated in the research conducted by Bialski and Batorski (2009), the sense of being static and passive is the short of feelings that couch surfers want to free themselves from. From the same research, another point that it was drawn was the fact that the main goal of couch surfing is to expand relationships by creating its own set of rules of friendship and familiarization, on the whole, to be far from the usual, to be alternative (Bialski & Batorski, 2009).

That said, couch surfers share a characteristic that cannot be found in people one meets out of platform; a common "spirit" that combines people of the community (Bialski & Batorski, 2009, p.183; Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015). The general idea of couch surfing is a practice that promises an alternative "under an individualistic, consumer capitalism – a utopian altruism" (Bialski & Batorski, 2009, p.183). In other words, couch surfing gives the opportunity to the locals in every possible destination to be

involved in the travelers' trips and create a cross-cultural interaction between them. These face-to-face interactions might create intense relationships, yet usually not long term ones (Chen, 2017).

However, the overall experience of hosting provided the opportunity to individuals to engage in meaningful social interaction in a manageable way, meaning that since the process is upon selecting whom to host, how frequently and for how long; having control over to whom to host or avoid with the hope that the guest will meet the host's expectations (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015). On the other hand, time constraints, not sharing the same interests or a general sense of not seeing eye to eye with one of the guests could have an impact on the shared moments of sociability. That is the moment where being a host could also be more tiring than enjoyable (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015).

Overall, the main motive that drives a person to share his/her possessions and personal space is considered to be an act of altruism and goes hand in hand with feelings like "solidarity" and "bonding" (Bucher et al., 2016, p.316). Additionally, sharing ones possessions could be beneficial for the one who shares since such act enhances their status within the community. However, when an individual starts sharing he/she exposes their possessions to either loss or damage (Bucher et al., 2016). As Belk (1988, as it is cited in Bucher et al., 2016), stated a lot of people feel attached to their possessions and they consider them as part of themselves. This is the reason why some people tend to avoid providing access to possessions of personal value, especially when the act of sharing takes place with people who do not belong to one's trusted circle (Bucher et al., 2016).

2.6 Decision-making Process of Potential Hosts

Decision-making is a skill that is present in nearly everything a person does in their daily life. Their lives are guided from the decision one makes and the consequences of them (Johnson & Busemeyer, 2010). A lot of factors may have an impact on the decisions that have already been made, so given that, it is important to be aware of the consequences so as to improve the future decisions. In order to reach that level of making the best decision, the 'what' and 'why' should be specified (Johnson & Busemeyer, 2010).

As it is stated by Doyle (1998; p.1), "choosing among alternatives in a way that properly accords with the preferences and beliefs of an individual decision maker" is what can be defined as rational decision-making process. Similarly, it is mentioned by Hwang and Masud (2012), decision making consists of attributes, objectives, goals and criteria. In other words, attributes are the characteristics of the alternatives, where the individual has to choose the 'best' alternative from a pool of preselected alternatives; choosing one decision over another (Pearl, 1996). Subsequently, the essence of the objectives, lie on the directions one needs to follow in order to "do better" as it is perceived by the decision maker (Hwang & Masud, 2012, p.12).

Although the objectives reflect the desires of the person making the decision and these desires indicate the direction the decision maker wants to reach (Hwang & Masud, 2012). Goals also play an important role in the process, since they reflect the things desired by the one making a decision and they are usually expressed as something specific in terms of space and time. Lastly, the criteria that are the standards of judgement, since they could indicate multiple attributes or objectives that need to be taken into account from the decision maker (Hwang & Masud, 2012).

However, as it is argued by Bellman and Zadeh (1970), most of the decision-making in the real world takes place in an environment where the consequences are not known exactly. Accordingly, a research conducted by Johnson and Busemeyer (2010), showed that people often do not view the outcomes of their decisions objectively but they view them in a more subjective way. Nevertheless, the satisfaction of a decision's outcome depends highly on the prior expectations one had; the higher the expectations, the greater the disappointment (Bell, 1985). Disappointment is a psychological reaction one has when the outcome of an experience has not met their expectations.

However, when reality meets one's expectations or exceeds the expectations the person had, euphoria takes place (Bell, 1985). Decision makers, who may have these feelings, should take into account uncertain alternatives that may have an impact on the outcome. Last but not least, as Bell (1985) points out in his paper, a decision maker is possible to make a certain decision in order to explicitly gain the psychological satisfaction.

3. Methodologies

For the purposes of the current research, qualitative method has been used in order to get the best possible answers for the research questions and to meet the research objective. As it is stated by Veal (2006), qualitative methods can be used for pragmatic reasons, in cases where is not necessary or possible to use a quantified method. It is also pointed out by the same author, that in quantitative research, the researcher's view on a situation tends to be imposed. In other words, the researcher decides what should be examined or not; the important issues that should be discussed and the framework in which the research will be conducted (Veal, 2006).

Qualitative research is based on the idea that the people personally involved in certain situations are best placed to describe thoroughly their experiences and emotions in their own words, without being constrained by the framework imposed by the researcher (Veal, 2006). Saunders et al. (2015), add on to what Veal (2006) has mentioned regarding the qualitative data, by stating that collecting results from non-standardized data requires the data to be classified into categories. In general, when qualitative method is used for a research, the information that can be collected tend to be more in depth, rather than using quantitate method where the information that are gathered are more limited about each of a large number of cases (Veal, 2006). Finally, the analysis of the data collected through qualitative methods, has to be conducted by the use of conceptualization (Saunders et al., 2015).

It is worth mentioning that in some cases, researchers often experience transformations that arise while conducting the research (Etherington, 2004). The author of the same source, points out the fact that through the process of conducting a study, one, can change and develop. The researchers, who value using themselves in every area of their research, are the ones most likely to use reflexive methodologies. However, the author states the belief that reflexivity is influenced by feminist approaches to research and as a consequence, it is in line with "women's ways of knowing" (Etherington, 2004, p.16). In other words, the ways that could be described as more 'feminine' concepts like "intuition" and "felt sense" (Etherington, 2004, p.16).

Similarly, as it is stated by Weber (2003), it is important for the researchers to develop the ability to reflect on, to understand more deeply, to assess, and to see the correlation among the assumptions that underlie a researcher's work. It is the ability to

distinguish what one knows and what he/she does not know about the subject, and to examine closely the research so as not only to gain more knowledge upon the subject, but also, to define the strengths and the limitations of the research (Weber, 2003). Assumptions that arise while conducting a research can be linked to cultural biases and political influences, for that reason, to reflect on the research, we, the researchers, have to "to come to grips with the ways we construct our understanding of the world" (Weber, 2003, p.v).

3.1 Methods

Consequently, the findings have been divided into themes and each theme has a part of discussion - reflexivity. I, the researcher, have made personal observations while gathering and transcribing my data and although they might have been influenced by the subjective standpoint, there could still be of value since the material gathered could only be gathered through long discussions with the participants.

For the purposes of gathering the data needed for the dissertation, interviews were carried out by the use of convenience sampling. Although, as it is stated by Fontana and Frey (1994), asking questions in order to get answers can be harder than it seems when the researcher first starts their research. Spoken words, as much as written words can be a matter of vague content; however, interviewing people is the most common research method (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The most common type of interview is face-to-face verbal interchange and it can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

Similarly, the research interview, as it is described by Saunders et al. (2015), it is the intentional conversation between two people, where the interviewer has to create a friendly relationship between themself and the interviewee and ask concise questions. Emphasizing on asking purposeful questions and carefully listening the interviewee's answers in order to explore them further or refine research ideas (Saunders et al. 2015). As Veal (2006) stated, when an interview takes place, the interviewer should not show any sign of agreement or disagreement or even trying to drive the interviewee's answers towards a specific direction. Moreover, the sample that was used was a type of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling, where the targeted sample met the criteria required for the purposes of the research (Etikan et al., 2016).

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions have been held with hosts. Semi-structured interviews require the researcher to have some key questions to be covered although the use of such questions may differentiate from interview to interview; meaning that the researcher might mean that some of the questions may not be asked and the order of the questions will adopt to the flow of the conversation (Saunders et al., 2015). Through the interviews there is the opportunity to investigate ideas and meanings that would add significance and depth to the data the researcher has obtained. However, the way the questions are asked may influence the data that the researcher collects, since it might affect the answers given by the interviewees (Saunders et al., 2015). Finally, providing anonymity can increase the level of the interviewee's confidence in the researcher's trustworthiness or response bias of the interviewee (Saunders et al., 2015).

More particularly, during the course of the interviews, participants, six in number and male in gender, described their experiences of hosting strangers through the platform of Couchsurfing. Since, it has been agreed not to reveal their personal information, I am allowed to say that three of the interviewees live in the United States of America, where two of them are originally from Mexico and India respectively. Two other hosts, Greeks in nationality, are located in Sweden and in the United Arab Emirates. Lastly, one of the hosts lives in the United Kingdom but he used to be more active as a host when he was studying in the Netherlands, the country he originally comes from.

They also talked about the possible risks –if any– of doing so, the motives that have driven them to this decision to start hosting people and the most important aspect of the whole idea of hosting is based on, is trust. The interviews overall lasted approximately one hour each and in some occasions, it exceeded the two hours of conversation in order to get a more insightful information regarding the motives of the host; since as it could be drawn, the real motive was not given straightforward by the host within the questions asked for that matter. Lastly, all the interviewees were asked the same question, if they would be willing to host me, as a new member of the online community.

The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed in order to analyze them and receive the best possible result. Transcribed interviews give the chance to the researcher to draw better conclusions by the themes that will come up while transcribing

them; let alone the non-verbal communication that can be drawn from the change in tone of the participant's answer (Veal, 2006; Saunders et al., 2015). Subsequently, thematic analysis was used for the data collected through the transcribed interviews; 'themes' usually refer to specific patterns that can be drawn from the data collected by the researcher (Joffe & Yardley, 2004; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

3.3.1 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a technique to be used for the purposes of gaining better understanding – insight of the research. It is a process which requires forming a list of 'themes', indicators and qualifications that could be related up to a certain point (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Similarly, thematic analysis as it is described by Boyatzis (1998), Braun and Clarke (2006), is a process for encoding information gathered in a qualitative process and creating a list of themes. Such themes can be drawn directly from the information provided by the respondent or from patterns that can be found in the information and might not be as observable as in the first case (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The themes usually emerge after reading the data gathered and sometimes, re-reading is required in order to fully identify all the themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The themes may be initially drawn inductively from raw information or generated deductively from theory and past research on the topic (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, as it is mentioned by Walters (2016), thematic analysis is considered to be under the rubric of discourse analysis since it brings into the surface the inherent cultural meanings. The most frequent use of thematic analysis appears in tourism in order to interpret written documents, which in the case of interviews would be the transcribed text (Walters, 2016).

Last but not least, the use of thematic analysis is most desirable when the methodology chosen for a research requires focusing on the clarity of the findings and the ease of communication; allowing also to expand the audience for the communication and the spread of the ideas drawn from the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.2 Sampling

Every research needs a sample to focus on, since it would be impossible to hold face-to-face interviews with all the users of Couchsurfing platform. Thus, a certain number of subjects that would be interviewed was selected. As Veal (2006, p.294), states qualitative research, "makes no claim to quantitative representativeness nor involves statistical calculations".

More specifically, the sample (hosts) of the current research, was supposed to be selected through the platform of Couchsurfing and approached by personal messaging on the platform; but, after making contact with the support team of Couchsurfing through e-mails, they did not give permission to the researcher to approach hosts on the platform due to the fact that it would be violation of their terms. Consequently, due to Couchsurfing terms, hosts could not be approached directly through the platform and therefore, they were contacted outside of it. In order to contact them, the contact was found through guests that have surfed.

For that reason, the sampling method that was used for the current research was 'convenience' sampling. As it is stated by Veal (2006, p.295), convenience is a sample when "conveniently located persons, like friends, students, etc." are used for that purpose. The research was based on convenience sampling since it was gathered through two friends of the researcher, who have been surfers themselves and they agreed to get in touch with some of their hosts on behalf of the researcher. Some of the hosts were willing to participate in the research and later on they were contacted via private messages and informed for the purpose of the research in detail. They were also reassured that anonymity will be held, as a result, the names of the hosts or any kind of private information, will not be used in the current thesis. Providing anonymity to the participants was based on the fact that as it was described by Saunders et al. (2015), anonymity can increase the interviewee's confidence and express freely his/her thoughts.

3.3 Limitations

It should be mentioned that there were some limitations in the research conducted, where without them the results might have been different. First of all, the research is restricted to the Couchsurfing context and since the qualitative method was used, the collected data and corresponding discussion have to be understood within the

context of the obtained sample. In other words, if there were no regulations from Couchsurfing, restricting me -the researcher- from contacting directly the hosts through their webpage, I would have probably gained a wider sample and mixed genders. Since I could only use the resources I was given from two people I knew that they have done couch surfing and they were willing to help me by getting in touch with some of their hosts on my behalf. Consequently, the accuracy of the results of the current analysis is limited due to the fact that no female hosts participated in the sampling space of my research.

4. Findings & Discussion

In this chapter, there will be a presentation of the themes that created according to the respondents' answers and further on, they will be a representation of the findings attached to those themes and a discussion for each of them supported by theory.

Through the interviews, the more general themes that could be drawn, as it is shown below, were: *sharing the same values*, *a sense of adventure*, *intuition & trust*, *relationships*, and *discomfort*. Risk, or any matter related to that topic did not arise from the interviews, since the hosts did not consider it as an aspect of the overall act of hosting people through the platform of Couchsurfing or other sorts of platforms similar to Couchsurfing (i.e. Warmshowers.org, for those traveling by bicycle). These platforms are based on a similar concept, since they offer free worldwide hospitality exchange for either people who would like to travel to a certain destination or for touring cyclists. In order to be a part of such communities, people have to be willing to provide their contact information, to offer accommodation and to share their stories along with a meal or a dink. Part of an unwritten deal is to exchange hospitality; meaning each member can provide or request hospitality from any member of the online community.

- **Sharing the same values**
- **A sense of adventure**
- **Intuition & Trust**
- **Relationships**
- **Discomfort**

More specifically, most of the participants mentioned that hosting people from all over the world, getting to know their cultures and their mentality, along with the possibility of creating long lasting friendships, were the main drives that intrigued the participants to engage into the act of hosting.

4.4.1 Sharing the same values

To get into more detail regarding the themes drawn throughout the process, curiosity to find people with whom they share the same values and learn about the other's cultural background, their travel stories, the type of food they used to have back in their home countries. According to Roccas et al. (2002, p.789), values could be described as "cognitive representations of desirable abstract goals". Roccas et al. (2002) also argue that 'values' can motivate an individual to engage into different kind of actions, since they can be characterized as similar to needs, motives and goals. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that personal values tend to focus on ones' motivations and desires, whereas, value orientations "have been described as fundamental dimensions upon which different cultures may vary" (McCarty & Shrum, 1994, p.55). Such differences may have an impact on the way the community members of each culture think and act (McCarty & Shrum, 1994).

More specifically, when the hosts offer accommodation to several guests, their need to connect with others and to share their values, gets satisfied. However, there were occasions were hosting certain guests did not fulfill that desire; instead they created uncomfortable situations where both the host and the guest had to endure till the day the guest requested the hospitality for.

As it was mentioned from most of the participants were intrigued by the fact that most of their guests wanted to see the destination through the eyes of a local and not to visit the sights the destination was mostly known for. In other words, the hosts were willing to go for long walks in the city along with their guests with the main purpose to explore. As it was stated by one of the interviewees "*You explore your city better, because when you host someone you try to find the most impressive spots of the city that you might have neglected due to lack of time, if you are working or studying*"; similarly as it was mentioned by another participant "*San Francisco is a city I really love and I want to share this with my guests […] tourist attractions are keeping you basically from doing things that are actually important*". The same host mentioned also that every time he welcomes his new guest, he provides them a map of the city with notes of which places to visit and a small notebook for them to take notes and his personal contact details in case they need any sort of help. Likewise, another interviewee mentioned that staying with a local makes the city more "*approachable*". Overall, hosting strangers from all over the world, it is a chance for the hosts to learn

new things about civilizations they may never have the chance to interact with; it could be summed up to a phrase one of the U.S. citizens said "*if I cannot travel, I will bring the world to me*".

Nevertheless, it is worth to be mentioned that one of the participants said that the whole idea of hosting relative strangers to one's house, was not a strange concept to him, due to his cultural background. He explained that when he was traveling with his parents back in his younger years in India, the country he originally comes from, they used to request hospitality from people they met in the places they were traveling to each time. He supported his argument by explaining the belief that Indian people used to hold onto, when somebody chose to stay at a hotel rather than staying at someone's place, used to mean that you lacked the ability of making friends. In his case, his cultural background and the memories he had from his childhood motivated him to enroll in the platform and engage in such exchange of hospitality.

Seemingly, what can be understood through the interviews, people tend to offer hospitality to strangers, not only out of pure curiosity to see how would be like to meet people from different parts of the world, but also to gain something out of it. Although, according to what they have told me, they seem to fulfill the profile of a good host, like Telfer (2001) described, since they all offered food, drink and shelter to their guests and tried to make their stay as enjoyable as possible. However, since the hosts get to decide whom to host, it contradicts with the general idea of hospitality as it was described in Greek mythology and stated by O'Gorman (2005), where the identity of the guest played no role for the hospitality they would receive. The hosts, nowadays, choose according to a picture, a written message, a written representation of one's self on a webpage. They all had an expectation when accepting a guest at their place, and that was to become somehow part of their traveling experience and maybe their friend. Although, as it is already stated in the theoretical background of the term reciprocity, people tend to do more uninvited favors since they can create a sense of making the receiver of the favor to repay for all the favors in the future (Fehr & Gächter, 2000). On the specific case of couch surfing, is to offer hospitality to the person once hosted them.

4.4.2 A sense of adventure

All of the hosts were asked a question where they should express their opinion regarding the type of people they have met through their guests. They all came down to the same answer, that this type of hospitality is more well known among people who seek low budget vacation and they do not plan to spend a long time in one city while traveling. One of the hosts with the greatest experience as a host on Couchsurfing (3500 guests within the last 10 years) tried to categorize the people that prefer Couchsurfing over other types of accommodation. The categories include artists, people who work for non-governmental organizations, backpackers and people who are after adventure and to find true connection and those who have limited resources for traveling. Attached to this, another U.S. host stated that "*people who are open-minded, adventurous, really curious to get to know other cultures for real, these are the ones that you meet*". Consequently, it could be argued that people, who have a sense of adventure, could be the ones who the hosts usually come across with. According to Oldham and Morris (1990, p.3), "adventurous types live by their own rules" and not by following society's norms. Oldham and Morris (1990) also argue that people who have a tendency towards adventure, they choose to live in the present and they challenge themselves with new experiences. Needless to say that this type of exchange of hospitality lies on the unwritten rule that every member who has hosted one person from any country or city, when he/she travels to their guest's country or city, they would ask them for accommodation.

It is undeniable that people travel for any possible reason, but travel expenses are not always within someone's budget. Although there is no monetary exchange between the guest and the host, like there is in commercial homes; where people are not driven by the pure interest for their guest but they care for the rise in the income of the business by providing a satisfying hospitality (Telfer, 2001). The guest might also be after experiencing the destination of their choice, through the locals' eyes and possibly fulfilling needs of their inner self.

4.4.3 Intuition & Trust

Although, trust is an important aspect on Couchsurfing, however, nearly all of the participants could not really define how they trust one person or not, especially before

meeting them in the real world. All of the respondents referred to trust as trusting their intuition when it comes to the question whether they trust the person they are about to host or not. Intuition could be defined as the use of knowledge that cannot be stated clearly and in detail (Hogarth, 2010), and it seems that it plays significant role when it comes to trust, since all the participants struggled when they were asked to define how they trust someone in the online world. However, it could be argued that intuition "improves the world, not just following the trodden path of thought" (Albert Einstein as it cited in Roghanizad & Neufeld, 2015, p.490). Such idea could be supported with one host's statement "*I have this philosophy that if I'm going to open my place to you, I have to trust you regardless […] only in extreme cases my trust would break*". It could also be argued that intuition lies on continually receiving information that the human brain is trying to process it, without one being consciously aware of (Hayashi, 2001); since, according to Bonabeau (2003), intuition could be described as an innate instinct or even it could be lied on plain common sense.

In other words, all of the hosts put their trust on the written reviews and comments of every past experience their potential guest has on their profile, their photos and the content of the personal text message they sent out when they asked for accommodation; trying to imagine how that guest might be in real life or if that guest had already been through the host's profile and if they had paid attention on the host's request. One of the hosts stated that for that purpose, he asks for other social media accounts of his potential guests, since he believes that "*their social life records helps me understand about what they do with their friends, if they are fun, conservative, racists etc.*". Similarly, another host said that he urges the potential guests to address him by name and not to use the more general expressions like "*hey*"; that is a way for him to know if that person has read his profile or not.

Nevertheless, everyone agreed that they go through each other's profiles on the platform, reading reviews and comments from past couch surfing experiences and checking the photos they have posted on their profile. They claimed that it is a means to get to know the other person a little bit and to be able to imagine how the experience of living hosting that person would be like. On the other hand though, there were some controversies regarding the guest's profile. There were four of the hosts that said that they pay much attention on the information provided on the guest's online profile and in the case where some of the potential guests' profiles were not fully informative and

the guests themselves were not providing a lot of information on their direct messages with the hosts, then the possibilities for their request to be accepted, were low. They insisted that only by reading the information the guests provided about themselves, the hosts could only build a sense of trust to that person.

Additionally, one of the hosts, Greek in nationality, when he was asked if he would provide his guests with a spare key of his place, he stated that his level of trust towards his guests is not so high for him to give them the freedom to walk in and out of his apartment by themselves. Although, he explained that if his guest(s) would be talkative and would show interest in his life, by engaging into conversations in order to get to know him, then he would most likely trust them and provide them a spare key. One of the U.S. hosts, Mexican in nationality, stated that after going through their profiles and they confirm the request for hosting someone, he greets them with a hug, like he does with the people he trusts, his friends.

However, as it was stated by the rest of the hosts (two in number), reading the reviews of someone's online profile in the platform was not the characteristic that determined their decision to proceed with providing hospitality to that person or to reject him/her. More specifically, they will provide accommodation, if they are available at the time, no matter if the request is less informative or a copy and paste message. One the hosts supported his argument on this by saying that "*if it's a copy and paste message, I'm still mixed about it, because I get that they might be busy or sometimes they need to send more than 50 requests before someone accepts them*". Similarly, the other host is more likely to accept a traveler's request when that traveler seems to be under time pressure for finding a host, because as he mentioned, he had been in such situation himself and it is a way to express his gratitude for finding a host when no one seemed willing to accept him on a last minute request.

Although, all the hosts agreed that somehow they trust their intuition for the person they will host that he/she looks trustworthy, all of them also said that in the end, they do not own things worth stealing. One of the hosts stated that whenever he was hosting an individual, he made sure all his valuable things were placed somewhere, where the guest could not have access to. On the contrary to that statement, another host pointed out that he believes that "*everyone is good*" and "*if stealing something would make them happy, so be it*".

Nonetheless, in matters of risk and the most uncertain part of deciding to accept a traveler's request for hosting, it seems that the main worry of all the participants was the possibility of not "clicking" with their guest. As one of the U.S. hosts stated that the thing that he fears the most is to end up hosting a person that "*he/she is energy drain […] the risk is more of a selfish one, I fear of my time*". Similarly, another U.S. host said "*it's not always the more you know, the better*", since the experience can turn into a not so pleasant one, after a certain period of time. That comment aroused from an incident that took place while hosting a religious person for a period of two months and their views towards life and sexual orientation collided. Consequently, they did not consider any sort of risk that could or would take place while hosting an individual, but the possibility of lacking connection with the guest, not being able to share stories or hold long and interesting conversations with them, worried them the most. All of the respondents while they were trying to sort out who of the possible guest requests they would accept, they were trying to filter through the reviews of past Couchsurfing experiences and the general information provided in their online profile, in what degree they would "click" and how pleasant would be the overall experience during their stay. Specifically, they were more concerned if they would have common interests, hobbies and topics of discussion or if they would go on adventures together.

One of the U.S. hosts, Indian in nationality, was the only host, the researcher has encountered with, with the greatest experience in being a host. In other words, he has been an active host the last eleven years and he has provided accommodation to nearly three thousand and five hundred (3500) people from all continents apart from Antarctica. Through his experiences he has managed to make a list of rules which have to be respected by all his guests, since he hosts multiple guests sometimes of more than one ethnicity (i.e. once he had guests from Israel and Palestine during the same period). Some of the most important rules are based on the fact that his house runs on solar energy, which means that the guests should take into account that the lights should be turned off every time they walk out of the room.

Moreover, since the host is vegetarian, he does not want any meat in his house by any of his guests. More specifically, apart from avoiding meat, he stated that he does not allow to any of his guests to bring their own food into his house. He justified his statement by saying "*I have people visiting from some of the richest countries in the world, Germany, France, Netherlands […] and they would come to my house and they*

would bring a 25cent bagle and they would tell that's mine [...] I grew up in a culture where no one is possessive about their food". For that host, not being able to share his food with his guests is something that contradicts with his childhood memories and that made him write down the rule of not letting his guests to bring their own food into the house. Similar to that, he also asked his guests not to cook if they do not ask for his permission first or if he is absent from the house. That rule came up when a guest of his, accidentally destroyed one of his utensils; it is worth mentioning that he explained also his attachment to buying utensils of high quality that he can keep as long as possible, just like what their parents used to do. The rest of his rules are more simple ones that are related with keeping the house as clean as possible and to work more as a team in order to achieve that.

On the contrary to the mentality of sharing one's food and having the freedom to go through one's refrigerator for that purpose, comes from one of the U.S. citizens; who did not allow to his guests to go through his refrigerator or eat the food he has cooked for himself, without asking for permission to do so. For that reason he has also created a list of rules similar to the list that has already been mentioned in terms of keeping the place clean and tidy, he adds that all of his guests are free to cook their own meal but not to expect the host himself to cook for them or to clean up after them. Also, since the host's profession is in the entrainment business he urges his potential guests to have a backup plan in case he has to leave the city for work.

However, there were times when a guest, as they were described by two of the hosts, where the guests would tell stories that they would made no sense or that something about them would not sound right. These incidents led one of the hosts, not to put so much trust on them but for the other host, although he mentioned that he would always make a note of such incidents; his behavior towards the guests would remain the same.

Lastly, only one of all the interviewees mentioned the possibility of a guest carrying any kind of disease as a possible risk when providing accommodation, although it was a risk that never applied to reality. One of the hosts, Greek in nationality and resident of Sweden, stated that the possible risks of hosting a stranger can be eliminated, when he receives a long message from them and through their message he can tell if the guest has read his profile and he also added up "*when you receive this type of messages, it cannot be something bad, usually the best type of guests I have ever*

hosted, have sent me a long text message at first". He also mentioned that he pays more attention to the information provided by a male guest, because as he said, he believes that a female guest could be less harmful than a male guest. Overall, in matters of risk, as it was mentioned above, they were more concerned about the possibility of not "clicking" with their guest. However, it is worth to be mentioned that two of the hosts mentioned bad experiences that could be considered that risk is involved, but these experiences which include sexual harassment happened to some of their guests, female in gender.

The main characteristic I found during all my conversations with the hosts was the fact that everyone kept on insisting that they do put their trust on their guests; since they trust their intuition. However, as it can be drawn from their words, they put trust on other people's words and critics about their potential guest. Consequently, 'trusting their intuition' could be translated as trusting other people's opinions about their potential guests. Trust, however, was a sense that was formed while interacting with their guests. As it is stated by Mayer et al. (1995), trust is the "willingness to take risk" and to be vulnerable. Additionally, having positive expectations for an upcoming guest, could lead to an increase of trust, according to Rousseau et al. (1998). Lastly, as it was described by Tyler (1996), trust is one's rational actions that are influenced by his/her expectations about how someone else is going to behave.

Everyone, except the U.S. citizen with Indian nationality, insisted on the fact that they would not provide accommodation to someone who has zero reviews from past experiences or they are new to the community. Not to mention that the person who was a host back in the Netherlands, when we first started our interview, he said that he just finish re-reading a book written by George Orwell, '1984', and he said that this book emphasized his realization about the "*despicable world we live in*"; or that he hides the stuff that he does not want to be stolen by any of his guests. Although, when they make the decision to host a stranger, they did not seem to take into account the fact that someone might steal something of the hosts' personal belongings. Nevertheless, everyone started forming a more proper opinion regarding 'trust' when they finally met their guests and spent a period of time together. As it is stated by Johnson and Grayson (2003), trust can be achieved through knowledge and observation of someone's behavior. When their expectations did not meet reality though, they did not put much faith on a guest, similar to what Zaltman and Moorman (1988) pointed out, where trust

is to expect n that the word given by another person will be held. The conclusion that can be drawn is that people seem to be more in need for communication with other people that may or may not share the same views, but they could at least enjoy each other's company.

4.4.4 Relationships

Relationships and especially friendships have been characterized by researchers, as the most important of the human relationships (Salmon, 2013). They seem to play an integral part in the hosts' lives, since all of them referred to that, either as a motive or as the best outcome of their experiences so far. Friendships could be described as voluntary relationships that involve a variety of activities such as talking on the phone or doing things together (Demır & Weitekamp, 2007). Additionally, as it is mentioned by Hartup (1992), the main characteristic of a friendship is reciprocity, while treating one another as equals and having common interests. Frenken and Schor (2017), support the idea by stating that, in a large scale, taking part in websites like Couchsurfing, results in formation of new friendships. Similarly as it is described by Decrop et al. (2018), the feeling of connectedness and trusting one another can lead to friendships that can last for life. On the other hand, Picard and Buchberger (2014) argue that, usually, the surfers are presented by their hosts as friends to their neighbors or families; since in a lot of cases, people do not accept the idea of hosting a stranger.

All of the hosts unexceptionally, have made new friends through couch surfing, with people from different parts of the world. With these people, they keep in touch, and although they may not talk to each other every week, in some occasions, they do keep in touch and share their news about their lives. Some of them, they have already been hosted by their new friends in their home country. One of the hosts even mentioned that he has been on vacation along with one of his guests and newly made friend. Making connections with people from all over the world and keeping in touch with them is what was stated through the interviews and it seemed to be the main motive that makes the interviewees keep on accepting strangers in their home.

In general, as it could be drawn out of the long conversations I held with the hosts, all of them seemed in need of feeling connected, or being part of someone's life and hopefully share the same interests. That realization applies to what Telfer (2001), has

described about a person's motives to start hosting strangers, might not linked to reciprocal purposes but they might be linked to the desire to benefit out of such act. In other words, to satisfy their own needs and not necessarily to cover the needs their guest may have (Telfer, 2001).

4.4.5 Discomfort

However, there are times where the hosts felt attracted to some of their guests, without that being their intention for hosting that specific person. As it is stated by Berscheid and Hatfield (1978), when an individual tries to put into words why he/she feels attracted to someone or repulsed, they tend to refer to some of the other's characteristics they may find attractive or repulsive, their personality, their appearance, etc. That said, one of the interviewees revealed that he has a gender preference when it comes to hosting people, and although he mentioned that what he is after is a true friendship; however he said that he only hosts male gender guests. In order to decide whom to host, he goes through their photos on Couchsurfing and social media (i.e. Facebook and Instagram) to see if their interests match and he has a preference in light skin color males, "*since I personally get attracted to light skin people*". Similarly, half the number of the interviewees revealed that they have felt sexual attraction to some of their guests but, as they claimed, they did nothing to reveal their feelings towards their guests in order to avoid making them feel uncomfortable. One of the hosts though, mentioned that through a guest of his, had met a person with whom, later on, involved in a romantic relationship.

Last but not least, like in every occasion where people share their lodging with others, there is the possibility where they may not get along with each other as they first expected to. For instance, there were some incidents that caused this sense of discomfort to the hosts. Two of the hosts, one in Europe and one in U.S.A., they had a similar experience with one of their guests who was barely talking. In both cases, the guests stayed at the hosts' house for five days and although both of the hosts tried to get into a conversation with them and do some activities together, the guests would not say anything.

One of the U.S. hosts described an incident similar to what it was mentioned above, feeling attracted to one of his guests and having to withhold his feelings, it

created a sense of discomfort for the time the guest was at his home. Another case where a sense of discomfort was felt by another U.S. host, while he was hosting a group of three friends at his house; he had handed them a key of the house for them to have the freedom to enter it any time they want, but even though it was their own responsibility to decide how they would manage with the key, they kept texting the host every time someone wanted to enter the house. That incident made the host ask them to leave the house. Such kind of incidents led the same host to create a list of rules for his guests while sharing his house. One of the hosts who is currently located in Sweden, said that "*I have never had any unpleasant experience with a guest, but I only accept requests for up to two nights for stayover, if they exceed that limit, it feels like you have no personal life*". Up to a certain extent such sense of discomfort can be compared to social conflicts that can result in the development of irritation; both are based on unfair behavior and negative attitude (Dormann & Zapf, 2002).

Subsequently, one of the U.S. participants, Mexican in nationality, described some of his experiences that caused him a sense of discomfort and characterized them as unpleasant ones. Specifically, he described an incident with a female guest –when he first started hosting he used to accept both genders as his guests– that female guest asked him to show her around the city and to pay for the food and drinks they had, claiming that "*I was the guy and she expected me to do that […] it was weird*". Another unpleasant experience of his, was related to another female guest who destroyed the air mattress she was sleeping on, by accident and "*she didn't even apologize or offer to pay for it*". Lastly, he also mentioned a habit of his by saying "*when I wake up, I'm in my underwear […] it's how I've done it […] I don't put pants on till I get ready*". Based on that fact, he said that with female guests, such act would cause discomfort but with male guests, he believes that they would not share a feeling of awkwardness.

Like in every occasion where individuals have to share lodging for a certain period of time, things may not always be enjoyable for both parties. Sometimes, it was even against the hospitality rules as they have been described in the Greek mythology, where every stranger would receive the same hospitality like a god would receive and not be thrown out of the host's home (O'Gorman, 2005). However, in terms of reciprocity, people tend to act accordingly to the people's actions they encounter with (Fehr & Gächter, 2000). All in all, no matter the experiences, all of the hosts stated that the overall experience of providing accommodation to strangers has been rewarding no

matter the cost and they are all prompt to keep offering a place to stay for strangers they meet on the online world.

5. Conclusion

Increasing tourists are focusing on the search for meaningful and authentic experiences. Authenticity is often linked to being able to have meaningful interaction with the residents of a destination. The way people couch surf where they are able to stay in the homes of residents is perceived to offer an opportunity for a more authentic, less commercialized experience. It could also be characterized as a way of travel that lacks in similarities to the mediated mass-marketed forms of tourism. Couchsurfing, in other words, has gone back to the past "as people are welcoming strangers into the privacy of their homes" (Rosen et al., 2011, p.982).

The literature review that was included in the current qualitative study, served the purposes of concluding existing studies regarding the act of couch surfing and the themes related to that, since it is part of the wider hospitality industry. When it comes to platforms like Couchsurfing, trust plays an important role and most of the studies have been focused on the creation of trust among the members of the network of the online world, through technology. When trust is gained, a person tends to look for potential friendships and as it is stated by Tang (2010, p.629), the online space makes it easier for people "to make friends with similar others and to do so across time and space". This idea is supported by the members of the online community who were interviewed, who seem not to consider it as a risk in providing accommodation to other members of the community. Moreover, the information on the platform's profiles helps the hosts to choose their potential guests according to the interests they have in common and as a consequence, they have an interest in meeting with.

The offline meeting of the potential guest is as important as the online interaction since a feeling of intimacy has to be built between the guest and the host agents. In order to achieve that, they need to do activities together. In other words, doing things together is an act of sharing. According to Rosen et al. (2011), trust plays significant role not only in society in general, but also in the context of online communities. In the case of Couchsurfing platform, trust is obtained through the information the users provide on their profiles and the communication they develop with other users of the community. Additionally, indicators such as a member's engagement in the community and the length of membership or hosting others seem to increase trust among the members.

The research that has taken place meets its objective that targeted towards the direction of understanding the reasons why would an individual would offer free accommodation to a stranger; since the main motive that drives al of the participants was the sense of connectivity and belonging to the community and as a result to meet people who could create a friendship with and share travel stories.

Consequently, Couchsurfing is an online community that has been grown the last years with a generalized reciprocity, where the participants take on the role of the host and the surfer. The available references for each member in the profile within the Couchsurfing platform, as they are created by past experiences, form a reputation system which enables a high degree of activity and reciprocity (Lauterbach et al., 2009).

To be more precise, the current research has achieved its **aim** which was to explore why a host shares their private space with a 'stranger'. The conversations held, in order to be fully informative, the participants were left freely to express their thoughts upon the topic and in some occasions, they were asked some extra questions in order to elaborate some parts. For that reason, qualitative research method was chosen and more specifically, semi-structured interviews were held with hosts that provide housing. Some of the questions asked were referring to risk, on how the host would perceive it, but as it came out, none of the participants perceived as risky the fact of hosting strangers; since, as they pointed out, they had already put trust on their guests before accepting their request for hospitality.

Finally, I would like to state that after holding all these conversations with the hosts and listening to their couch surfing stories, pleasant or unpleasant ones, I came to realize that couch surfing is an experience itself, where one needs to step out of his/her comfort zone and to be open to new things. People who engage into that form of seeking accommodation, they usually carry one common motive, the need to connect and share stories about traveling and their cultural backgrounds. The overall outcome of being a host could be summarized to the statement one of the hosts made "if I cannot travel, I will bring the world to me". Forming a group of people who carry similar values and beliefs about life and the kind of the relationships formed while surfing to people's homes, resulting to lifelong friendships with some of the guests.

Last but not least, this research has contributed to the literature on matters of understanding someone's way of thinking and conceiving the world in order to enroll in an online community and share the privacy of their homes with relative strangers.

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Appendix (Interview Guide)

Question 1	Why did you decide to start offering accommodation to relative strangers? What do you find as the most appealing characteristic of doing so? What kind of people would participate on such exchange of hospitality?
Question 2	How long have you been a host? What is the most uncertain part of deciding to accept a traveler's request? What are the possible risks of doing so? Do you have any standards of choosing your guests?
Question 3	How do you communicate with each potential guest the minute they send their request? Do you ask for more personal information or way of communication with them? What type of information would that be and why?
Question 4	Could you briefly describe your experiences as a host so far? Was there any unpleasant experience with a guest that had an impact in your overall experience as a host?
Question 5	What is the decision-making process you follow when you receive a request for hosting someone? In what degree do you trust the person sending their request for hosting? How would you say if that person seems trustworthy or not? Would you like them to know any specific rule you have as a host?
Question 6	When the guest arrives at your home, what do you talk about? What kind of topics would you discuss in detail?
Question 7	Would you like to talk about two or your best experiences? What was the characteristic that made them memorable? Did you participate in any event at your home destination with your guest?
Question 8	Do you think the longer you spend with the guest, the closer the relationship is? What are the factors that influence these feelings?

Question 9	During the stay of the guest, what kind of acts/behaviors would increase or decrease the level of trustworthiness?
Question 10	Lastly, when the guest leaves your place, what is the main motive to make you keep in touch with him/her?