

## Investigating Safeness of an Alternative Travel – Couch Surfing

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the safeness of the internet based website Couch surfing (CS). My thirty nine participants joined the CS website and planned their own trip. They met for eight weeks for two hours each week in order to discuss their experience. During this time we created a questionnaire on the safeness of the CS experience. Each person spent approximately 4 – 5 hours on the computer locating a potential CS for a total of 156 hours of experience using the website. After the CS experience, each person filled out the questionnaire. As a result of 39 participants going CS there was approximately 935 hours of time spent involved in this research. In order for CS to be a safe experience one must complete the following three actions: Make various contacts with the host before the CS experience, read and study the references of the host, and confirm the profile of the individual from the CS website. The initial face to face contact with the host may be difficult due to schedules, travel difficulties, as well as expectations.

**Keywords:** Alternative Travel, Over-tourism, Active Research

### INTRODUCTION

Tourists may be motivated to connect with local citizens during their travel; many travelers believe this can make a positive impact throughout our world. Further, the result of this interaction will show new information and knowledge about the world in various and unique ways. Some countries have become more isolated and insular, rather than integrated and supportive. Suspicion of others, as well as their ways of life, may augment prejudice and conflict. Rather than becoming more peaceful, this century has witnessed increasing nationalism, conflict, and even war. We have witnessed terrorism across the globe; even tourist destinations are not safe. One simple way to promote peace and friendliness to others is through the medium of travel or tourism. There are many ways this can happen, for example in the USA the National Parks offer a campground program where each evening visitors can come together and listen to an educational talk. Part of this tradition is for each person to introduce themselves - promoting friendliness during travel. Another way this may happen is through a website called Couch Surfing (CS).

This new trend of travel, which allows for free accommodation and the opportunity for a

cultural exchange. The CS may be able to interact with the local community, to learn some of their language, customs, culture, and to try traditional food. It is also an opportunity to begin new relationships with others; this also takes the participants from being a stranger to the possibility of a new friend. Couch surfers are a group of like-minded people who want an inexpensive cultural exchange. If one is a host, they open their homes to strangers, hosting them for a few days, may help them to see their city, and learn about other cultures. CS may be somewhat risky when one considers sleeping in the home of a stranger. This ‘leap of faith’ into a stranger’s home is not for everyone. This new style of recreation and tourism seems misaligned with tourism and the business of travel. CS are avoiding hotels, seeking cultural experiences, and looking for free housing. Lurking beneath the beautiful and luxurious world of travel are several hidden, overlooked, and misunderstood ways to move around the world. This sustainable perspective of travel has had its share of difficulty and misunderstandings; basically, ‘how can I trust a stranger?’ becomes the underlying perspective in this practical and interesting way to travel. There is a responsibility and a reciprocity that may be assumed while CS. The potential of CS

is only limited by its vulnerability; if it is a safe experience the opportunity for its impact is limitless. Safety seems to be assumed in this new style of travel, and most research is on the experience or potential of the CS, therefore this research will focus on the safety.

Further, the amazing potential of this style of travel to create a sustainable experience is worth noting. The tourist industry cannot continue to promote only ways of profit to be made from the traveler, this unsustainable perspective is not tenable. Couch surfing can provide an alternative to 'over tourism' and should be accepted as well as other alternative forms of travel that may lie beyond the scope of tourism. If couch surfing can promote a style of travel that is compatible with sustainable philosophy then an investigation into its safeness is merited. Therefore the purpose of this study is to investigate the safety aspects of CS. Research Questions are the following: 1. how the traveler felt safe during the experience. 2. How does the website of CS promote safety? 3. How did the traveler confirm their safety before, during, and after the experience? Although there is an array of information, especially on the internet about CS, the academic topic of research and CS is limited. We have organized this information around three themes: the 'amazing stories' of CS, the relationships between CS and host, the international perspective and theme.

### *Amazing Stories*

Picard and Buchberger (2013) discuss the concept of couch surfing. They want to know if this website is doing as it claims - to make the world a better place. They discuss how couch surfing reflects on current trends in travel and tourism especially that of new and creative travel. They raise the following issue: Is CS a rejection of hotels and a cheap way to move students around? With more than four million followers, the stories of CS and their interaction with strangers sounds like an inspirational book for travelers. This new form of travel is oriented toward the brave and young, dependence on the internet, and the exciting potential that anything can happen during this experience.

CS is more than simply sleeping on someone's couch. To be active on CS implies meeting, trusting, and hosting a stranger, as well as the possibility of other activities such as becoming a host and attending a local CS meeting. They discuss some amazing stories of the CS experience, yet also pontificate on the social implications of others who are using CS for

other reasons. Molz (2013a) goes into detail of one CS who is traversing the world with no money. They raise the following questions: Is this budget traveler someone to admire or just a homeless wanderer? Does CS promote this sort of behavior, a drop out mentality, or is the CS some sort of new traveler promoting an unconventional world order?

### *The Relationships between CS and Host*

Similar to ideas of O' Regan (2013) the relationship between the traveler and the host can become very dynamic, balancing between negative and positive. Buchberger (2013) discussed how CS does not open the individual to a wider world; rather the host may become closed minded during the CS experience. There is potential conflict with anyone, especially those who are from a narrow minded or fundamentalist background.

Victor, Cornelis, DeCock, and Herrera-Viedma (2011) point out that this bringing together of strangers creates an interesting and dynamic relationship of trust and distrust played by both parts. This going back and forth is more vague than understandable and real world situations are more different than virtual. Regardless, CS, like most relationships, is based on a mutual reciprocity, if this breaks down, then the potential relationship is over.

Lampinen (2016) discusses the concept of managing the CS experience. This network of hospitality requires an organization between the guest and host. Of special concern in this study was the multi-person household and the way they managed the CS experience. Among these participants there are rules, there is an expected mutual cooperation, and there are some physical boundaries. Turn taking, delegating, rules, and consensual agreements were a part of this CS experience. Luo and Zhang (2016) as well as Molz (2013 a,b) discuss trust. Their studies center on interpersonal relationships that occurred during the CS experience. They showed these relationships evolved over three stages – early, middle, and late. Initial trust is formed online, and then changes to offline, the relationship continues to develop from courtesy, to instrumental, and then emotional. This initial trust between the CS and host is a mutual back and forth communication through the internet. Eventually this trust is strengthened through some other means, most likely a direct communication through the phone, internet, or email. And, it will become confirmed as the relationship becomes active, through real time,

and then afterwards, the reflection of the memory of the event will further confirm the experience.

Molz (2013a) emphasizes even though the CS sleeps for free there is still a sense of reciprocity. There still is some sort of exchange between the host and the guest. Further, if this does not occur, then the host perceives the guest as a free loader and tries to get rid of him/her. Especially taken for granted are ideas of neatness, cleanliness, and willingness to do some chores. According to CS ideas, hopefully the guest, will be willing to also become a host. CS uses a flexible vouching system including one verification system for a fee; and, the CS website allows the CS to rate or to describe the experience with one's host.

Molz (2013a) discussed how this fast growing on line alternative to hotels is based on trust. This 'leap of faith' by the traveler is confirmed by meeting and having their expectations met. In another paper Molz (2013b) more closely ties a moral perspective into the situations of CS. This exploration of a moral economy in this alternative form of tourism helps one to understand the dynamic process between the participant and the host. CS is a trust and intimacy among strangers from a technological form of travel which is based on a moral landscape of trust. This authentic experience of staying in the home of a native has the appeal of authentic tourism rather than a room in a hotel.

### *International Experience*

The CS community promotes connections between people from different cultures fostering positive and negative scenarios (Zuev, 2013). Various challenges include the world's fascination with the west as well as misconceptions or prejudices that take place during the CS experience. For example, there is an underlying assumption that English language will be used. Yet, this eliminates many CS who are not proficient in English language. The author describes one host's disappointment in a 'western' guest who was not friendly and wanted to remain in their room. Chen (2013) discussed how western ideas promote a cosmopolitan discourse yet it does not represent all of the factors in the world. There were twenty-one interviews with CS from Taiwan, over the website, as well as a group workshop with them. This included 8 men and 13 women; they found that people go on CS because they want interesting and authentic international experiences.

Standing alone is the significant study of Bialski (2013) whose ethnographic study of CS included 3500 open ended surveys. This research reveals CS has grown from 30,000 users in 2005 to almost 5 million registered participants today. At the time of this research, every week there are 40,024 positive 'get-togethers' through the CS website versus 84 negative ones. And, every week there are an estimated 189,879 people who have made a connection through couch surfing. There are new ways to connect with others over the internet such as - four square, Facebook, messaging, snap chat, as well as CS. This promotes new ways of friending, flirting, and romancing. When these CS are connecting over the internet, they are not asking 'how are you', they are asking 'where are you' and 'what is up' with the hopes of connecting and meeting. This down plays early critics of the internet, who proclaimed we would become an isolated and lonely society, instead, these programs like CS are bringing people together in new and creative ways. CS helps one meet and adventure with strangers from around the world and most people are interested in face to face experiences rather than the virtual experience.

Sleeping in a stranger's home for free can be an interesting, educational, political, as well as energizing activity (Schuckert, Peters, & Pilz, 2018). Steves (2015) suggests there is a need to understand the political element of travel. Part of this understanding is the positive potential of travel to open doors to new friends, knowledge, and to feel more comfortable with others. This includes understanding the friendliness, trust, and diversity of travel. "By learning from our travels and bringing these ideas home, we can make our nation even stronger...the power of diversity, this should come naturally to us...and be celebrated" (p. viii). We must move beyond "my country is the greatest in the world" to every country is the best in that person's view and accept and learn from one another.

### **METHODOLOGY**

In order to answer the questions posed by this research, thirty-nine participants joined the CS website and planned their own trip. My participants also became a part of a focus group for two hours for eight weeks. This enabled them to learn more about CS and to discuss their experience. During this time we created our own questionnaire on the safeness of the CS experience. Each participant completed this after their own CS trip. This questionnaire was

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informed by the CS website, other information on CS, as well as research papers. Initially each participant created their own questionnaire. After this, as a group we discussed and debated

each question confirming the validity and reliability of this questionnaire according to content validity.

**Table1.** Couch Surfing (CS) Safety Questionnaire

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Did you have any negative experience from your CS trip? Yes/No what was it?</li><li>• What are some guidelines to make sure one has a safe CS experience?</li><li>• 1 means the least safe and 10 means very safe, rank how you felt during your experience. Before going on CS experience: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10. Why?</li><li>• During the CS experience: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10. Why?</li><li>• After the CS experience: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10. Why?</li><li>• What are some factors to consider from the profile if someone is to be considered safe?</li><li>• What are some factors to consider from the profile if someone is to be considered non-safe?</li><li>• Are there some suggestions you have in order to improve the Website – internet program of CS?</li><li>• What did you enjoy about your CS experience?</li><li>• What did you not enjoy about your CS experience?</li><li>• If something had gone wrong, did you have a plan of how to handle this? What was it?</li><li>• Any additional comment you feel is important about CS safety?</li></ul> |
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The rigor of this research is supported by the extensive traveler of this researcher. The questionnaire was carefully based on experience, research, and discussion. We also met weekly to discuss the issues of creating a safe CS experience. Difficulties and problems encountered were discussed and solutions were sought from this focus group, especially those who had a successful CS experience. Each experience resulted in 24 – 72 hours of being with the host of the CS, this eventually accumulated into approximately 836 hours of fieldwork on the topic of CS.

This experiential ethnography allowed for the participant to go beyond virtual information to practical fieldwork. The participants all chose to be involved in the CS program and to write about their experiences. Permission was granted through the ethical concerns of this university. Additional safety measures were taken concerning the fieldwork, this included not going alone, parental consent, letting others know, and having a backup plan. These participants were all part of a student exchange program called Erasmus.

### FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The following information reveals the answers of the participants for each question from the questionnaire. The purpose of this study was fulfilled while thirty-eight participants slept on someone's couch, bed, or floor, one participant chose not to participate, and instead attended a CS event in this town. These thirty nine participants had a total of 65 CS experiences. Thirteen of these participants have also hosted a CS for a total of 20 times. Only one participant

attended a couch surfing event. Nineteen of the participants were 20 years of age, nine were 21, three were 22, three were 23, one was 24, and five were 25. There were 13 female, and 25 male. Most of the participants were from Spain – 20, the others were from Hungary – 3, Turkey – 2, France – 2, Italy – 4, Slovakia – 7, and the following countries had one participant – Belarus, Canada, Portugal, and Poland. All of the participants have joined the CS community or website, and three are verified.

The following are the participant's response to the first question on the questionnaire - 'Did you have any negative experience from your CS trip? Yes/No what was it?' "I had to wait for one hour for my host, but that was all." "When we met our host, she gave us the keys and left, she had a dinner with her friends, we were in the house and did not know what to use, or how to use it." "My first meeting, my host did not have time this evening, plus our arrival was delayed, so she was upset."

Even though CS places the visitor in a vulnerable position, according to these answers there was no true negative experience that questioned the safeness of the CS. However, as in most travel situations there can be some negative issues, from these participants this centered around schedules, expectations, and being around a stranger.

According to question 2 - What are some guidelines to make sure one has a safe CS experience?

Each participant listed three main guideless in order to make sure one will have a safe CS experience. Twenty-six said to check out or

study the references of the person you will be staying with over the CS website. Very similar twenty-two said one should read or check their profile. Third place was the advice of having conversations with the potential host – nineteen. Here are some specific comments from the participants: “You must devote a lot of time to your search...” “To be honest I am not sure, I was lucky to have good CS places, or I am stupid not to see something bad.” “Answers should be very personal, to provide you with a feeling that you know the person.” “The profile must be positive with good reviews...” The participants agreed on several aspects of how this could be a safe experience. Reading the references and profile, beginning to communicate with the host, and confirming what was said with pictures. However, it should be stressed that this involves studying the profile and confirming what one thinks is true about the individual.

Concerning the sense of safety during the CS experience, this question is in three parts - before, during, and after. Before one went on the CS experience most participants felt a medium sense of safeness during the CS experience. Two participants said four, ten said five, five said six, four said seven, three said eight, four said nine, and five said ten. One who said four stated; “I was scared with this experience because I had never done it, this is a program on internet, and some people may take advantage of this website for something bad.” One who said 10 stated; “Because it was my first CS experience, I did not know where I was going, everything was an intrigue and surprise to me, I had always before been in hotels, so I was nervous.” These answers reveal the potential of the CS to be wary of their trip.

During the CS experience how safe did you feel? On a scale of 1 – 10, two indicated five, one indicated six, thirteen indicated eight, seven indicated nine, and nine indicated 10. “Our host trust us so we trust her, she gave us a key for her flat, maybe I was not so comfortable, but for sure safe.” “Our host when we met was very nice, and then all our fears left, but I cannot get rid of this strange feeling, that I am in a foreign country and in a stranger’s flat.”; “My host was very friendly and open minded.”; “All of my CS experiences went pretty well, and everything was just like it was described to me.”; “We did not have any kind of problems and I felt so comfortable.” The third part of this question is how you felt after the entire CS experience was over. Two checked 5, one checked 6, two

checked 7, four checked 8, eight checked 9, and sixteen checked 10. “I think I was lucky in getting to stay with a family, it’s difficult to find people who are not alone...or someone with good references who will accept you.”; “I think you just always must take care if you are doing CS, yet my overall experience was good.”; “This was such a great experience and everyone should try this.” “It was ok, but we really did not spend so much time there or with them. Now I am really confident about CS.” “I felt really good about this experience and I should do it more often, it was very positive, and I did not feel unsafe at any point.” One can clearly see from the results of this questionnaire that the longer one stayed with the host, the more comfortable they were.

The next question focuses on what are some factors shown from the profile if someone is to be considered safe? The dominant response, 30, said positive references. Twenty-one said profile photos, and ten said that being verified is a way to communicate one is safe. “The photos should also include the place where one will stay, and have a picture of the host, and one should consider what their face indicates, the photos should reflect something normal and trusting.” “The communication should include phone, ‘sms’, and emails.”

And on the other perspective were there some factors in the profile that may indicate the person is not safe. The participants said the following, a lack of photos – 20, a lack of references or comments – 17, not enough information on the website – 14, and negative references – 13. Interestingly, the participants were looking for photos in order to personally verify the information. This missing information from photos or references was enough to make the potential CS to seek for another person.

Because CS is based on the internet website, this question is focused on ways to improve the website. Five participants said there should be some place for identification numbers in order to avoid fake, false, misleading information. Three people said there should be video chatting. Two participants asked the CS not to allow the host to be able to remove negative comments. These comments offered some interesting advice for the CS website. The main one mentioned was a type of verification without any expense. Also the idea of a video chat could be helpful.

Continuing the focus of this research on discovering how to make this experience safe,

the next question also focuses on the website and on the profile. The participant is to elaborate on what should alert the reader that someone is not safe. It is interesting that the main issue is a lack of photos. Twenty participants said that if there are no photos then perhaps the individual is hiding something. Lack of references 17, not enough information 14, and negative references were also discussed. Interestingly, the participants were looking for pictures in order to verify the information. This missing of information from photos, or references, was enough to make the potential CS seek for another person.

It is important to know how the individual felt about their experience with CS. This question focused on the overall enjoyment of the CS experience and had the most response. I will include a few of the statements from the participants. “The most enjoyable thing about CS is to know local people and keep the travel spirit alive, to have the opportunity to exchange culture, points of view, food and traditions.” “I spent a fantastic time in a new place, in a really expensive city, and I did not have to spend money for the hostel, I met local people and talked with them, see their customs, way of life, I discovered new places with local people, it was nice and saved time to have a local show you around.” “I enjoyed meetings others, getting to know their culture, telling about my culture, a dinner that was typical food – and we made typical dessert; now I believe there are very good people in the world who help others without wanting anything in return, I want also to be a host.” “Totally everything, I love to travel, so I was excited to see another country and new people.” Only a few participants were also a host to a CS. As a host they also expressed how much they enjoyed this. “I like that even I could stay in my place, and I have someone from another country come to me and visit.

It is also important to consider the opposite of this question. What did the participant not like or not enjoy. There was not much response on this question. The following statements summarize the answers. “You are conditioned by the life of the CS host, if they have to work or study, you have to wait for them.” “The first impression was negative, but after this, it changed totally, the trust soon began to build, and it turn out amazing.” “The first experience, she had something planned, so she just gave us the key, and left, we did not know what to do.” Although this research focused on safeness, this

question allows the participant to share anything about the experience that they were uncomfortable with. Most of the responses reflect issues of conflict of schedule and just the simple uncomfortableness of being with someone you don’t know. No one in this research program felt unsafe. The participants felt it was important to know what to do in case there was something unusual that took place during this CS experience. This question focused on this ‘plan of action’ in case something had gone wrong. Most participants said – they would leave (5), others said they would go to another place to sleep (4), and similar number stated they would call the police (4), and keep in touch with your friends while CS (2). Other comments were: “I did not even consider anything as dangerous.”; “If necessary, tell your friends and your parents you are going.”; “Have a getaway idea.”; “We knew we had the phone, and we could call if we needed, that was it.”; “I knew I could say goodbye and leave anytime and go find another place to stay.” The participants needed to have some idea of what to do if things became unsafe. Most answers centered on leaving and going to another place. Others discussed calling the police, however, it should be stated that this never happened.

Lastly, just to make sure all ideas and comments were included, the questionnaire allowed the participants to close with any other additional comment. Some of these were: “This is an adventure experience and nice to do one time, but if you want to have more comfortable travel, I think couch surfing is not for you, you have to adapt you and enjoy this beautiful experience.” “CS is very nice experience, really enjoyable, new way of travel, and keeps the spirit and essence of travel; I would recommend to all, it is for adventure seekers for curious people and for those who want to share.” “The idea of CS is very good, this travel free, but I wasted too much time looking up everything about potential hosts, houses, addresses, texting them, etc. – and eventually I could not go where I wanted because they never responded, etc., so I ended up going to some place where a friend of mind had gone couch surfing...” This open ended questionnaire allows the participant to share any idea about the process. The main answers were focused on the adventure of CS, opportunity to learn something new, that it takes time and work to find a place to stay, and that there is some responsibility involved with this program.

As a result of this study I can state how the CS experience can be a safe experience. The foundation of the CS experience is 'trust.' This new online friendliness helps to create a sense of hope and positive change in a seemingly precarious world. As a result of the 39 participants I can state that CS can be safe if one is willing to do the following. 1. Spend the necessary amount of time searching over the Website the profile or information of the potential host. 2. Travel with another person, someone of an opposite gender. 3. Stay with a family. 4. Let your family and friends know what you are doing and where you are going and your contact. 5. Contact the host by email, message, and phone before you arrive. Continue this contact with them until you feel comfortable going to their house. 6. Have a backup plan if there is any problem or concern. There seems to be an assumption in CS that everyone is trustworthy and reliable. This rainbow perspective of travel overlooks the dark side of travel. There are unethical tourists as well as tourist vendors, some who are taking advantage of others, or some who are hoping for a hidden agenda other than what is expressed. Traveling places the sojourner in an awkward state where others may take advantage, especially because they are out of their home environment. Therefore, it is imperative that safety be clearly addressed.

In summary there are several considerations to make in order to be safe during the CS experience. Find the safe CS host by searching and spending the time on the internet. Become more acquainted with the individual as a result of personal communication, especially phone, messaging, as well as email. Go with another person on the CS experience. As a result of these findings we can state clearly you will have a safe experience, however, this does not mean problem free.

### DISCUSSION

Tans' (2010) research, similar to mine, focuses on the adventures of the couch surfer. Although the experience seemed quite simple, it still required a 'leap of faith' into an unknown and new adventure with a stranger. This excitement, fueled by the uncertainty of new places, experiences, and people may be part of the dynamic behind the success of CS. Tans' fifteen participants were similar to my 39 participants who suspended their 'normal life' at the university and entered the home of a stranger. Each person in both studies experienced a vast

array of personal growth and knowledge about trust and insight. Another similar research by Schuckert, Peters, and Pilz (2018) interviewed 14 participants who were involved in CS both as a participant as well as a host of other CS. My research adds additional information about this unique form of travel by incorporating a questionnaire and a focus group.

This sharing of material and emotional resources as mentioned by Molz (2013) was also repeatedly discussed by my participants. Similar to Molz, my research was intended to encourage a careful deliberation of the way CS works and to promote the potential of this website to bring together strangers in a trusting and safe environment. Further adding to this, the technical aspect of CS forces the stranger and host to attempt to make a decision about who, what, when, and where. Unfortunately beginning CS may have more difficulty finding a host especially if one has no references. And, as mentioned by Lie, Nie, and Li (2016) most couch surfers are very similar. They enjoy travelling, they don't mind Spartan conditions or 'roughing it a bit,' they are willing to take a risky adventure, they enjoy meeting other people, and learning about new places. The trust upon which CS is based is built mutually and is an important foundation of this new type of travel. Interestingly, according to Rosen, LaFontaine, and Hendrickson (2011) CS seems to perpetuate its own membership, and the more they are visiting face to face, the experience becomes more meaningful. Many of the people involved with CS are young, have a strong cultural background, know other languages, and want to travel.

Something rarely mentioned concerning CS is the overall dependence on the internet. Searching, confirming, and obtaining reliable information about the host is essential in order to ensure a safe experience. Younger generations, students, as well as unplanned adults may try to find a CS experience quickly after they decide to go on a trip. The entire experience is dependent on the internet and one's access to the internet. My participants discovered a spontaneous, quick search rarely ends in a successful CS situation. The best way to begin a CS experience is two to three weeks before one embarks. This research has shown the necessary and overlooked part of CS is the work involved in finding a safe place to sleep; further it seems that popular destinations are more difficult to find a CS. However, if one is willing to forgo the popular tourist sites and

visit a rural area it is much easier to find a couch.

This research focuses on 39 participants who went on 78 CS experiences including sleeping on a stranger's sofa, or hosting a stranger, or attending a CS event. Question nine was included because according to the Review Board it was necessary to have an escape plan. In addition I required the participants to take a further measure of safety which included the following: permission and knowledge of parents, traveling with another, and having a personal plan of escape. Yet, when the participants discussed their experience CS they never mentioned these three considerations.

The CS experience is based on a significant amount of time searching the internet concerning the profile of the individual. Learning how to use a new website implies a self-directed learning experience. Self-directed learning (SDL) is an informal style of education outside of the classroom, also including personal reflection in learning, social dynamics in learning, and naturally occurring situations (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991; Confessor, 1992; Jarvis, 2001). Each participant related how they had to learn on their own what is involved in gaining a positive CS experience. One of the experiences of these CS is how this new information results in a 'changing sense of self.' The individual has journeyed from a nervous, shy, and somewhat scared CS to face the unknown aspects of entering the home of a stranger, and then to realize they could relax, and even fall asleep on a stranger's couch. This change, this evolution of behavior, this metamorphosis of trust is something which has remained with the traveler. This is similar to Luo and Zhang (2016) who identified the issues of safety during the three phases of the CS experience - early, during, and after. The longer the participant stayed the more comfortable they were.

My participants, similar to Picard and Buchberger (2013), were surprised that something like CS existed. For some of them it was like 'a dream come true' - they sleep somewhere for free and they could make a new friend. They all discussed the dynamic relationship (O'Regan, 2013) between the traveler and the host. There was often nervousness at the beginning, yet, with time, they become more comfortable and felt safe. Only a few people from this sample experienced anything negative, which was due to coordinating schedules and lateness. No one experienced any

situation that threatened their safety. Although this research was focused on safety, we also found that the CS experience is transformational. One participant stated: "I feel so different now, this sensation of trust, to go from being nervous to calm, and to be able to sleep in a stranger's house. Everyone must try this." The psychology of this experience was also its own adventure, going from a stranger communicating over a website, interacting over internet, entering their home - all resulted in a concomitant experience of different and multiple personalities. Each person went through their own metamorphosis and journey of nervousness to feeling more comfortable, to getting to know the person, and becoming relaxed. Similar to ideas from Zuev (2013) there were a variety of cross cultural interactions during the CS experience. However, unlike some of his/her experiences my participants rarely had any negative issue. English language was usually spoken by all the participants, and the most conflict took place in the initial phase of the stay due to lateness or travel change. Unlike Buchberger (2013) or Chen (2013) there was no conflict with culture or religion among my participants.

My research confirmed the findings of Bialski (2013) which indicates the growing interest in CS, most of the meetings on CS are positive, and can many of these lead to friendships. Also because people active in CS want to have a positive profile, they are motivated to take care of their guests. Similar to ideas of Victor, Cornelis, DeCock, and Herrera-Viedma (2011) this level of reciprocity in the CS experience helps to promote a conducive atmosphere. My participants discussed how they learned to manage the CS experience. Similar to Lampinen (2016) this requires an organization of what will happen between the guest and host. There are rules as well as multi-person households to consider. The mutual cooperation between host and guest was upmost as well as the consideration of others. All of this seems to be based on the idea of trusting a stranger. Although I focused on safety, yet intertwined in this idea is the concept of trust. Each person felt safe, because they eventually realized they could trust the other. Luo and Zhang (2016) and Molz (a,b) also discuss the issue of trust. Each person who had a successful CS experience goes through their own unique journey of trust. Beginning with the initial contact, until leaving, there is an ongoing back and forth process where host and guest are trying to insure each

other that they will have a safe experience. Travel and tourism is enhanced by interacting with locals who live there (Roberson, 2003); this cooperations and getting to know a local is quite simple and easy with a CS experience. Steves (2015) also emphasizes being with locals and getting to know their stories. CS is an easy way for this to happen. All of my participants felt that getting to know the host was the best part of the experience.

### CONCLUSION

As a result of CS, as well as other internet based tourist sites, there is a potential for an on-line 'togetherness' across the world. This dependence on social media and on-line collaboration has allowed for a greater connectedness to strangers everywhere. Further this tourism based on an already established infrastructure is completely sustainable and compatible with every current living situation. This innovative construction of dynamic social bonds, based on trust, is a global phenomenon (Costa and Goncalves, 2015). This technologically enabled interdependence is bringing strangers together rather than the illusion that the internet will separate people. This is also a reflection on our society that is increasingly connected through the internet and the mobile phone.

According to my participants, CS can be a completely safe and reliable way to travel. The traveler must spend adequate time on the internet investigating the profile of the potential host. Another aspect of a safe CS experience is taking the time for reading comments from others and confirming what they are saying by pictures they post. The second level is to make personal contact the host by email and phone. The relationship between the CS and the host is very dynamic and can proceed in a positive or negative manner. Further, an additional level of safety will happen if one does the following: travel with another person, let your contacts know what you are doing, where you are going, and your contact information, and have a backup plan if there is any problem or concern.

Despite the fallacies surrounding the ideas of nationalization or 'Brexit' or concerns of xenophobia, we can also conclude that there is a friendly world. Or rather that those who want to meet others from different countries and cultures are figuring out ways to make this happen. Internet technology is developing very fast, and those who are comfortable with this will be able to take advantage of such programs as CS. The travel and tourism industry is trying

to understand more about this unique and somewhat threatening movement (Schuckert et al. , 2018). Some people are very motivated to save money, especially money that would previously have gone to a hotel. Many people are tired of paying large fees for motel/hotel rooms; CS has liberated many of these people.

With recent troubles from the CS website and its change from completely free to a fee for verification there has been a drop in CS interest. There has also been a more skeptical view of the internet since information on Facebook has been lost, emails are continually being hacked, and large companies are losing their private information. And lastly, with the change in the demographics especially in Europe, refugees traveling through most countries and notions such as nationalism - all of these seem to stifle the overall attitude of CS. Regardless of the fate of this creative venture, CS is a unique, safe, and inspiring experience. CS can be a way to learn about other places and culture. CS may be personally transformative experience as the individual learns to trust a stranger.

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