Locating friendships in the Couchsurfing community

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Figure title page: compilation of two Couchsurfing images from www.couchsurfing .org.

This thesis is part of my master research and a textual analysis accompanying my ethnographic film:

"Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community".

Synopsis film

The ethnographic film "Flexible Friendship in the Couchsurfing community" is an autobiographical account of my own Couchsurfing experiences during my two months of fieldwork in 2012. It shows my first steps into becoming a member of the Couchsurfing community by building my Couchsurfing profile. The film is an account of my Couchsurfing experiences when "surfing" the four homes of my hosts in the Netherlands. Following the step by step process of a "typical" Couchsurfing experience, I question the friendships made during these encounters. A typical Couchsurfing experience starts with an online couch request and learning the identity of my host through their profile. The interaction then moves to the offline staying with the host. In the end I write the online review of the Couchsurfing experience. In addition I interview my host on their own views of Couchsurfing and the social connections they make during hosting, surfing or meetings. By using video I convey the emotional aspect of trusting a ´stranger´ while sleeping in their homes. I also reflect on the relationship of online and offline environments. Furthermore by using video I make the collecting of research data visible and show how I as a researcher relate to my subjects.

In the thesis below I will refer to scenes and data from the film by time codes, such as: (time codes 21:23). In addition quotes and scenes from the interviews have been altered to fit the medium of text. However the essence of what is said is still preserved.

1. Introduction: Finding friendships in the Couchsurfing community

Below is a summery from conversations I had with one of my hosts Albert and his view on Couchsurfing friendships. He is very vocal on why he loves Couchsurfing and the connections he makes with people during hosting and surfing.

On his profile Albert stated that:

"The only problem that I have with Couchsurfing is that I keep falling in love with other Couchsurfers. Not in a sexual sort of way just in a WOW, what an amazing and wonderful person, I want to spend 10 more hours with him-her sort of way. And then, In a day, or a week they are out of my life and move on to their next adventure. Never to be seen again."

Albert describes the intenseness of the interaction and intimate relationship you can have with a person during Couchsurfing. However he is also aware of the finite of this connection. Couchsurfing would not be Couchsurfing if the person would not leave again. *"Most people you will meet during Couchsurfing, you will never see them again. There life is far away and this is disappointing."* However after this experience *"You can still ask them to be friends on the Couchsurfing website, in different scales. Like Facebook you can have a 1000 friends and only 1 or 2 real friends and maybe the same is true with Couchsurfing"*(Time code 24:00*).*

1.1 Locating Friendships in hospitality exchange networks

Social network sites are credited for opening up new possibilities in maintaining and creating new social relationships (Lewis & West 2009, Tang 2010).These relationships in social network sites are labeled by organization as "friends". Couchsurfing is a social network site that also uses the label of friendship to validate the connections made. At the same time, these friendships are devalued by society. Some studies suggest that there are no real friendships made on social networking sites (Deresiewicz 2009). However my host Albert values the Couchsurfing friendships he makes as intimate and strong. At the same time he is also aware that the Couchsurfing relationships are not the same as his everyday friendships. He values them in their own right and still labels it as friendship. These ambiguities make me question how friendship relations are influenced by new communication technologies, such as social networking sites.

Couchsurfing is a social networking site with the purpose of hospitality exchange between strangers. Couchsurfing is an interesting social networking site because of this hospitality aspect. It is used by people who travel the world to find a place to sleep by creating

a network of "friends" who share their accommodation with strangers. This is seen as unusual by some people to invite a stranger for a few days in somebody´s home, however for others this seems as a interesting idea. Furthermore, because of the hospitality aspect, the Couchsurfing interaction starts out online, travels to the offline environment of the home and then back again online. This aspects makes Couchsurfing an interesting online community, because the social interaction takes place both online and offline.

Moreover Couchsurfing goes against the social norms "as people are welcoming strangers into the privacy of their homes: (Rosen, Lafontaine & Hendrickson 2011: 982). These strangers are invited into an 'intimate' home space, which can facilitate intimate and friendly encounters, exactly as Albert describes. The Couchsurfing organization is promoting these social relationships by stating that "that a stranger is just a *friends you haven't met yet*" (Couchsurfing 2014a). In 2012 Couchsurfing has released statistics that they have facilitated over 19,1 million friendship links (Couchsurfing 2012b). However how can a stranger become a friend? In this paper I question how friendships relations take shape in the Couchsurfing community.

1.2 Research questions

This paper will discuss how friendships can develop from a couchsurfing encounter. The people who are meeting are strangers to one another. However even though they are strangers, they can still feel an intimate and strong bond during hosting and surfing. This seems unusual to have when strangers are interacting. However as I am discussing, Couchsurfing can facilitate friendship relations to form in a short period of time. I will explore how relationships are constructed and facilitated through the online hospitality platform. This paper will thus give an account of my study into understanding the relationships people build during Couchsurfing and how these relationship migrate from online to offline spaces. The aim of this study is to shine new light on the debates about how the internet is affecting the way we form social ties with other people. A study by Boyd (2007) suggest that there is a difference between friendship made through social networks and in the offline world. However "we cannot think of friendship on social network sites as entirely different and disconnected from our actual friends and notions of friendship, particularly as young people grow up and are informed by the connections they make on social network sites" (Beer 2008: 520). Often online friendships can travel from online to offline spaces, and back again to online. Thus, my key research question that I will be discussing in this paper is: How does friendship take shape in the online and offline

community of Couchsurfers?

My paper will also seek to address three other research questions. The first is how trust is build within the Couchsurfing community and what does this trust entail? Trust is an important aspect of friendship relations, even more so in the case of Couchsurfing where social relationships travel from online to offline environments. Trust is necessary element for friendship to develop, without trust there can be no friendship. However there are a few difficulties in creating a intimate relationship with a person you have not met face to face. Henderson & Gilden (2004) indentify thee problems in creating trust: the difficulty in reading social cues, accountability and the danger of deceit (2004:496-497). On the other hand these difficulties can also open up new opportunities in creating trust and friendship online. Henderson & Gilden (2004) reported that people disclose a lot of personal information when building an online friendship. This disclosing of information effects the pre-commitment people feel towards a relationship. In other words, it makes them more invested in the relationship.

The aspect of trust becomes more important in the Couchsurfing hospitality exchange, because the risk for broken trust is higher. In the hospitality exchange between Couchsurfers, people build relationships online and pursue this relationships face to face in somebody's home. If a Couchsurfer trusts the wrong person, this Couchsurfer could literally end up hurt or robbed. Essentially Couchsurfers take a "leap of faith" when trusting another person. This is a concept by Möllering (2001) to explain the feeling of suspension we feel when we take a bet on the trustworthiness of a person. People have this feeling of suspension, because we can never be a hundred percent sure that we know the future actions of a person.

The second research question is concerned with how online and offline spaces influence the interactions? And how does this affect the level of trust and intimacy in a personal relationships, such as friendship? A study by Tang (2010) on the development of online friendship to different online and offline settings suggest that the more spaces a online friendship expands to the more intimate and stronger it becomes. Tang (2010) did research on seafarer partners who use an internet platform to communicate with other seafarer partners. His study argues that online spaces make it easier to meet new friends "with similar others and to do so across time and space", however "offline settings facilitate friendship development"(2010; 629). Each social setting being it online or offline has is strengths and limitations in making friends. Online, it is easier to find like minded individuals and explore each other's feelings. Nonetheless Tang (2010) sees the offline shift in friendship as important to create more intimacy. Offline friends can support friends to do joint activities and do

practical things together (2010: 629).

The Couchsurfing platform creates the possibility for people from different cultural backgrounds and countries to meet and share their home, lives and resources. Couchsurfers can look through the Couchsurfing profiles and find other people they would like to meet. However geographical location and space are still an important factor when the social interaction travels from online to offline spaces. Tang states in his research the importance of geographical location when initiating online friendships (2010: 627). His respondents found that they considered location to be important when deciding to pursue a friendship. I will argue that this also holds true for Couchsurfing friendships.

Finally I will also look at how these Couchsurfing friendships are valued and talked about by my respondents? Are they weak or strong, global or local and very intimate of not? What are the motivations for members for engaging in this social practice? Albert uses the label of friendship to describe the relationships he builds during Couchsurfing. However some studies have suggested that calling somebody a friend on a social networking site does not mean the same as friendships in 'real' life (Boyd 2006, Boyd 2007, Lewis & West 2009).

A key characteristic of social networking sites is the process of making a profile and publicly collecting a list of other uses with whom you share a connection (Boyd & Ellison 2008: 211). Social networking sites often label these connections as "friends". The friendship list that is created is made visible and this makes it possible to traverse through these friendship lists. Thus a study by Boyd (2006) concluded that calling somebody a friend on a social networking sites means something different than calling somebody a friend in the offline world.

Furthermore studies have concluded that calling somebody a friend on a social network site does not necessarily mean there is a strong bond. For example Lewis & West (2009) did research on the process of 'friending' on Facebook. To ´friend´ on Facebook, users create a profile and ´collect´ friends on a reciprocal basis. In their study they conclude that Facebook is mostly about maintaining weak ties with low commitment values and that "Facebook was very useful for keeping in touch with this category of 'friend': 'people you just don't see socially that much, but it doesn't necessarily mean you don't want to hear from them ever again"(Lewis & West 2009: 1218). It can thus be concluded that a 'friend' on a social networking site can refer to several different kinds of relationships (Lewis & West 2009, Boyd 2006). Precisely because of this fact some studies have criticized social networking sites for weakening the bonds of real friendships. (Deresiewicz 2009)

However as I argue in this paper, "we cannot think of friendship on social network

sites as entirely different and disconnected from our actual friends and notions of friendship, particularly as young people grow up and are informed by the connections they make on social network sites" (Beer 2008: 520). Often online friendships can travel from online to offline spaces, and back again to online. Friendships that start out in a online environments can become strong and intimate, because they are not limited to exist only in an online environment (Tang 2010). And that is why researching a community such as Couchsurfing, where people can connect and interact both online and offline could shine new light on how friendships, that are mediated by the internet are connected to our actual friends and notions of friendship. Moreover with the Couchsurfing friendship as described by Albert as 'strong, intimate and intense', this questions the fact that social networking sites are mostly about maintaining weak and low-commitment bonds.

1.3 Paper overview

This thesis has been divided into five parts. In the first part I will introduce the methods used in my research. Together with this textual analysis I will discuss the audiovisual component and how this is central to my research effort that is part of this master thesis. Here I will also briefly introduce my respondents portrayed in the ethnographic film.

In the next section of this paper I will give a brief overview of the literature on friendship and trust which forms the theoretical framework for my Couchsurfing research. In my theoretical framework I will discuss the characteristics of social networking sites and how this relates to friendship. Boyd & Ellison (2008) state that social networking sites are mostly about maintaining weak, offline social contacts and not about initiating new contacts with strangers (Boyd & Ellison 2008:2011). In this section I will question this distinction.

The following part will introduce the Couchsurfing organization and explain how Couchsurfing works. I will focus on the online space, the general infrastructure of the website and how people can connect to each other. It will also discuss the history of Couchsurfing itself and what is means to be part of the Couchsurfing community. I will reflect on how Couchsurfing grew to become a global organization setting up couchsurfing encounters all over the world. Furthermore I will discuss how Couchsurfers learn what it means to be part of the Couchsurfing community. I will then reflect on my own online profile, discussing what kind of information is given to the rest of the community and what the importance is of those online spaces for trust and communication.

In the last part of my thesis I will discuss the Couchsurfing experiences of myself and my respondents. I will examine in further detail the audiovisual data and relate this to my own

observations. In this last part I will reflect on how my respondents talked about the social relationships they build during Couchsurfing. In this paper I will argue that the Couchsurfing website provides a platform for initiating contact, but its value lies in facilitation offline social contact.

Before discussing my methods, it is important to discuss my own personal interest in researching friendship and trust in the Couchsurfing community. I became interested in Couchsurfing during my internship in the Philippines in 2011. I worked on a project with the Aiesec organization [1]to promote the Philippines as a tourist destination. During this project I became friends with Kerstin who introduced me to the community of Couchsurfers and took me on my first Couchsurfing experience.

1.4 Methods

This study was exploratory and interpretative in nature. The approach to my research was qualitative and based on the methods of visual ethnography, participant observation and semi-structured interviews with my respondents during my Couchsurfing fieldwork. I started my fieldwork in January 2012 and conducted my interviews during the next two months of participating in the Couchsurfing community in the Netherlands. I used the method of visual ethnography during my participant observations. Visual anthropology involves both the anthropology of the visual and the use of visual research methods to portray knowledge (Pink 2009: 10). As MacDougall (1997) states in his work on the relationship between the visual and anthropology: "Visual anthropology is not about the visual per se but about a range of culturally inflected relationships enmeshed and encoded in the visual. Just as anthropology can read some of these in the visual, so too it can use the visual to construct works that give a richer sense of how culture permeates and patterns social experience" (MacDougall 1997: 288). In my research I incorporated the visual methods to portray knowledge and give a richer sense of how culture permeates social experience. However I also used the visual methods to reflect on my own research and how my presence affected the situation.

An important aspect of participant observation is to reflect on the role of the researcher in their own fieldwork. This is important because it demystifies how data is collected and constructed in anthropological research. Participant observation is usually conducted during a longer time period where the "participant observer immerse themselves in a culture and learn to remove themselves everyday from that immersion so they can intellectualize what they

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[1] Aisec is an international nonprofit organization that provides young people with leadership opportunities to develop themselves into global leaders with an urge to make a difference in society.

have seen and heard, put it into perspective, and write about it convincingly. When done right, participant observation turns fieldworkers into instruments of data collection and data analysis" (Bernard 2006: 344). Because of the limited time available I conducted a ethnography where I focused on myself and the relationships I developed with my respondents during Couchsurfing. And above all, by conducting an ethnography where the focus is on myself and the relationship with my respondents, I can make the process of information and data collection more transparent and reflexive. It also helps to acknowledge the role of myself as ethnographer in the construction of my film and academic text.

This makes that large part of my research and audiovisual data is based on reflexive autobiographical ethnography. As mentioned before a large part of doing ethnography is the relationship that an anthropologists develops with their respondents and both analyzing and reflecting on this relationship. "Inherent in the nature of the ethnographer and netnographer, the researcher must constantly maintain a tension, tacking back and forth, between the experientially close involvement with the members of online community and culture, and the more abstract and distanced world of theory, words, generality, and research focus" (Kozinets 2009:97). This tension that Kozinets (2009) described in his methodology for digital ethnography is related to what Ruby argued as the logo centric approach of doing research, by translating these cultural experiences into concepts, a lot of knowledge is lost. In ethnography "the researcher must convert the complex experiences of fieldwork to words in a notebook and then transform those words into other words shifted through analytic methods and theories… The promise of visual anthropology is that it might provide an alternative way of perceiving culture-perception constructed though the lens" (Ruby 1996: 1351). This alternative way to view culture that Ruby mentions is through images and for this reason I filmed part of my fieldwork in the Couchsurfing community.

It is also important to note the advantages and limitations of my research and methods. By applying the method of visual ethnography, filming my encounters and large parts of my Couchsurfing experiences I captured a great deal of auditory and visual data. Film also has the advantage of giving the impression to the viewer of being there. However it is important to be aware that the camera does not objectively observe reality. As Spier (1973) observes about the relationship of the camera and 'reality as is': "The camera has position in both time and space, and therefore imposes a perspective on any action. Turning the camera on and off is an automatic structuring of events, as determined by the bias of the camera operator. Editing is another selection process and a second restructuring. …For an ethnographic filmmaker to be successful he must thoroughly understand his people, and he must do his best to let the

indigenous structure guide him in his recording efforts." (Spier 1973:179-180). This indigenous structure as Spier states is about understanding as a researcher the respondents in your field and what for knowledge you are trying to convey to your public.

Thus it is important to understand your own role as a researcher and how the person behind the camera can influence the situation. When taking the camera with me into the field, I influence my respondents and their actions. For example, when filming my own Couchsurfing experiences, I was only with my respondents for short period of time. There was no time for the respondents to get used to the camera being around. Ethnographers usually first get acquainted with the field they are filming before they actually start. Because I felt the first encounters during Couchsurfing where important, I filmed my first moments of actually meeting the people I was staying with. This often resulted in shaky images and nervous behavior from my part, not knowing the person I was about to meet.

I recruited my respondents by using the Couchsurfing forum of the "Netherlands group". Here I posted a message introducing my research and asking for people who are interested in hosting me for a few days. I also used my online Couchsurfing profile to explain who I was and what my intentions were as a researcher. I will delve deeper into the process of building my online profile in part two of my paper and how I presented myself online.

The three male subjects I used in my film all contacted me after seeing my message on the ´Netherlands' group forum. I contacted the female respondent Susanne myself after I noticed that a female Couchsurfing was missing. I chose to contact her because she was an experienced Couchsurfer with over 400 friends and further more she had been a Couchsurfing ambassador London, England.

In this paper I will include observations I made that were not captured on film. Due to practical constraints it was not always possible to record everything on film. I had to film my own interactions with my hosts en surfers and I noticed that this sometimes impaired the relationship between me and my host. Therefore I will also include observations from when I hosted people myself and other Couchsurfing experiences. I had to cut material from my film, when I stayed with one host in Groningen and lastly I went to different Couchsurfing meetings and events in Leiden and The Hague.

This paper complements my film, my research questions and makes my analysis explicit and thus places the events in the film in a broader theoretical framework. The visual presentation of the data cannot replace words in a conventional theoretical discussion (Pink 2013: 10), however different types of ethnographic knowledge can complement each other

and "may be experienced and represented in a range of different textual, visual and sensory ways"(Pink 2013:10).

1.5 Introducing my respondents in the film

In my film the viewer is introduced to four respondents. I will give a short introduction below of who they are by using screenshots from the film.

Figure 2: Screenshot of Bart from the film Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community

The first Couchsurfer in my film is Bart from Hoorn. He is 53 years old, divorced and has two daughters. I stayed with him for 2 nights and interviewed him about the significance of Couchsurfing is his social life and what Couchsurfing means to him.

Figure 3: Screenshot of Anmar from the film "Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community".

The second respondent was Anmar from Amsterdam. I stayed with him for two nights. He is 28 years old and a biology student originally from Iraq.
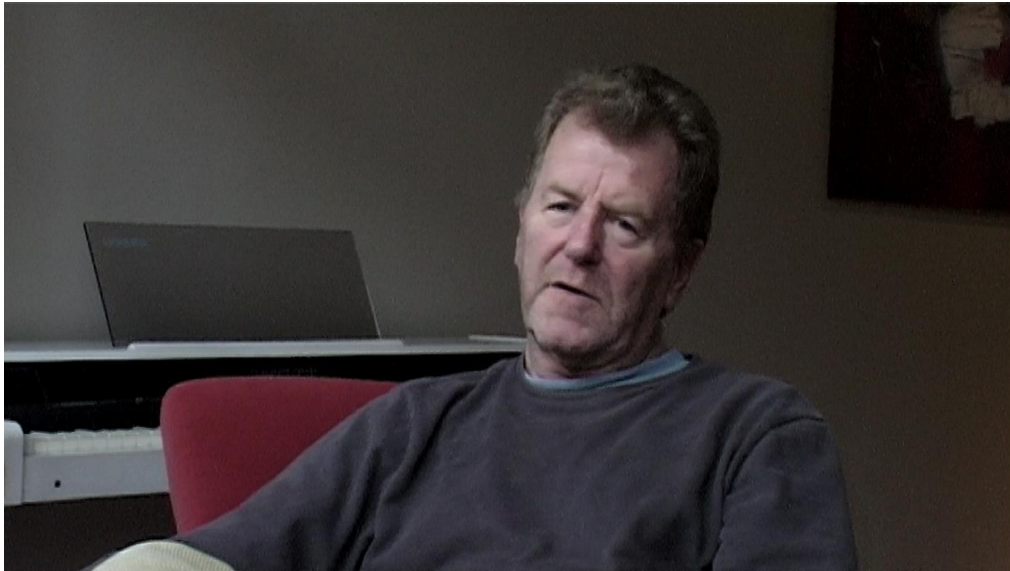
Figure 4: Screenshot of Albert from the film "Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community".

My third Couchsurfer is Albert from The Hague. He is 52, also divorced and has a daughter and son, who both live with him. Both the daughter and the son did not wish to be filmed and when asked about the Couchsurfing of their father, the son declared that the is not that excited about having people over all the time. The hardest thing he mentioned was the lack of privacy.

Figure 5: Screenshot of Susanne from the film Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community

The last respondent is Susanne, she is 27 years old and resides in Tilburg. I contacted

her because she was one of the few active female Couchsurfer in the Netherlands. Susanne is a very experienced Couchsurfing and is even been an ambassador for Couchsurfers in London. An ambassador is an active Couchsurfer selected by the organization, who is willing to monitor the community in their city, organize events, welcome new members and give out information on Couchsurfing.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter describes the theoretical concept of friendship and trust and explains why friendship is an important concept to research in contemporary society. The questions what friendship is and how we can we look at friendship in relation to social networking sites will be discussed.

2.1 Social network sites and friendship

What is the relationship between social networking sites and Couchsurfing and what does this mean for friendship? To answer this question we must first determine what a social networking site is. Boyd and Ellison (2008) provided in their paper a historical overview of the rise of social networking sites. In their paper they discuss some of the key characteristics of social networking sites and propose a comprehensive definition: "We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site" (Boyd & Ellison 2008:211). In addition to this broad definition they also make a distinction between the term "social network sites" and "social networking sites". Boyd and Ellison (2008) critique the use of the term "social networking sites because of an interesting distinction they make based on the two aspects of "emphasis and scope". "Networking" emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers. While networking is possible on these sites, it is not the primary practice on many of them, nor is it what differentiates them from other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC)" (Ellison & Boyd 2008:211). They also state that what makes them "unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks"(2008:211).

According to Boyd and Ellison's (2008) comprehensive definition based on the three key characteristics Couchsurfing could be defined as a social network site. Couchsurfing is a web based service that allows individuals to make a profile within the system, it also allows the user to have a list of users with whom they share a connection and it is also possible to browse through the list. Boyd and Ellison (2008) also briefly mention Couchsurfing in their paper, describing it as a social network site to meet travelers for a couch (2008: 216) and describing it as a social network site that is "activity centered" (2008: 218). However by trying to develop a broad definition and also at the same time trying to be specific on what

makes social network sites unique, they exclude sites such as Couchsurfing from their scope. Furthermore the unique aspect of the visibility of users profiles and creating a public display of connection is also observable in the Couchsurfing system. This questions the general assumptions that Ellison and Boyd (2008) make on whether social networks or networking can be exclusively divided by meeting new people, strangers or that it is about the visibility of already existing social connections. For this reason I will use the term social networking site to refer to websites such as Facebook and Couchsurfing.

Several studies have researched the connection between friendship and social network sites. An example is the study by Lewis and West (2009) on the process of "friending" on Facebook. To ´friend´ on Facebook, users create a profile and ´collect´ friends on a reciprocal basis. Reciprocal on the basis that a friendship request must be acknowledged from both sides to be included in the friendship list. For their research Lewis and West (2009) interviewed 16 young adults in undergraduate school. In their study they explore the social relationships that are fostered on Facebook. They include in line with other research that Facebook is mostly about maintaining weak ties with low commitment values and that the use of Facebook did not result in an increase of meaningful connections."In line with the findings of Ellison et al. (2007), that Facebook was important for maintaining contact with old friends and acquaintances, it was generally agreed that Facebook was very useful for keeping in touch with this category of 'friend': 'people you just don't see socially that much, but it doesn't necessarily mean you don't want to hear from them ever again"(Lewis & West 2009: 1218). In contrast with the research of Lewis and West the Couchsurfing organization promotes the relationships made as "meaningful" and not as a weak tie with low commitment . Nevertheless the relationships on Couchsurfing could still be classified as the category of friends Lewis & West (2009) call people who you don't see every day, but still want to keep in touch with.

2.2 The label of friendship

Using the label friend tells something about the quality of that relationship. The label friend in defining a relationship with a person is not only a categorical label, it is a sign of the sentimental value that is put on the relationship. With other words, "'friend' is not just a categorical label, like 'colleague' or 'cousin', indicating the social position of each individual relative to the other. Rather, it is a relational term which signifies something about the quality and character of the relationship involved" (Allan 1989: 16). For this reason people differentiate between several friendship relations, such as ´real´ or best friends, childhood

friends or even a distant friends. In addition, using the label of friend can depend on the social situation. In some situations a person can be introduced as a friend and in others be called an acquaintance. This distinction depends on the value attached to the term friendship. This means that calling a person a friend can have many different meanings in many different situations. For this reason Facebook has often been criticized for its use of the term friend. Many different social connections from vague acquaintances, even people you have never met and best friends are labeled as friends on the Facebook application (Boyd 2006, Lewis & West 2009). In the Couchsurfing community this variation in labeling different friendship relations is also present and will be discussed in further detail in this paper.

The highest form of friendship in our society is that of a 'real friendship' (Allen 1989). Brian described his friendship as " a bond of enormous moral significance: as one of the highest expressions of voluntary, altruistic commitment there can be between two people" (Brain 1976). In our society a lot of moral significance is given to having a real friendship (Allen 1989). A person that is always there for you no matter what. In our everyday life having a real friends that upholds the characteristics of a real friend is rare. For this reason we actually have many different types of friend and not all of them have to shape themselves to be 'real' friendships.

Allen (1989) differentiates these different types of friendship relations on the level of 'trust, intimacy and commitment' we have with people (Allan 1989: 14). The sharing of information and feelings with people we trust determines the level of friendship we feel towards them. According to a study by Houghton and Joinson (2010) people control the sharing of information with different kinds of social relationships(2010:79). We exchange more detailed information and emotions with people we have an intimate relationship with and we share less information with people we barely know (Reiman 1976). However this sharing of information based on the degree of intimacy has been contradicted by studies stating that people share a lot of intimate information online with people they barely know or have not seen each other face to face (Boyd & Ellison 2008). For example Boyd and Ellison (2008) observed one important difference between online friendships on social network sites and friendship in the offline context. They stated that "that ''Friends'' on SNSs are not the same as ''friends'' in the everyday sense; instead, Friends provide context by offering users an imagined audience to guide behavioral norms"(2008: 220). This imagined audience that Boyd and Ellison mention has sparked debates on the growing concern for privacy on social networking sites. Studies have observed that people disclose more personal information than they are aware of on their Facebook account (Barnes 2006) As Barnes notes on her study on

teenagers use and privacy issues on social networking sites "sharing their personal information on social networking sites is not only sharing with online friends. Parents, future employers, and university officials can also read journal entries" (2006: n.p.). I wonder how this degree of sharing of information would apply to a case such as Couchsurfing. Would people be more open and candid in sharing information with a Couchsurfing 'friend' than they would with other friendships in their everyday life?

2.3 Online Friendship and trust

Henderson & Gilden (2004) researched trust and hyperpersonal communication in online friendships. They applied Sztompka's (1999) theory of trust for their research and questioned how hyperpersonal communication is possible when the internet appears to limit the basis for the development of trust. Sztompka's (1999) argued that the internet highlighted the dilemma of anonymity as a factor that limits trust. The term "hyperpersonal communication describes the way in which online communication can "surpass the level of affection and emotion of parallel face-to face communication"(Walter 1996: 17). A greater level of intimacy can be achieved online because of certain communicative advantages of online communication. Walther (1996) suggested that greater cues are achieved due to the abilities for manipulation and self censuring of information. To test the theory of how trust can be achieved online, Henderson & Gilden (2004) interviewed 17 chat room users about their online friendships, of which 9 of them they exclusively interviewed online.

There are three main concern Henderson & Gilden (2004) noted when building online friendships: "the difficulty in reading social cues, accountability and the danger of deceit" (2004:496-497). However this difficulties can also become opportunities for enhanced trust (2004). Limited cues can facilitate a fast tracked self disclosure, asynchronous communication helps respondents in taking care of their words and the lack of accountability created opportunities to feel save when disclosing sensitive information.|

Based on Sztompka's (1999) theory of trust, Henderson & Gilden (2004) concluded that there are four main sources of online trust. The four sources are reputation, performance, pre-commitment, through self-disclosure and situational factors, such as the importance of intimacy in our contemporary society. The first two sources are related to what Sztompka's (1999) indentified as primary trustworthiness. Primary trustworthiness is based on the three individual traits of reputation, performance and appearance. The first source, reputation, is grounded in the identity of the user. It is often thought that people online can't have a reputation because they can hide behind their computer in anonymity. However it is important

to make a distinction between anonymity and pseudonymous identity in online environments (Henderson & Gilden 2004: 494). An anonymous individual can't establish a reputation and a personal history, however pseudonymous users can build a reputation in a online environment based upon past actions. The second source, performance, is related to the direct actions and deeds of a person on the internet. There is also performance in face to face interaction. Ervin Goffman (1959) described social life as a performance where people can manage those performances by dress, speech and manner. In an online environment people have less social cues to read and create those performances. However they do have more opportunities to manage and enhance them because of asynchronous communication.

Henderson & Gilden (2004) state that the trait of appearance was the least important and did not include it in their four sources of trust. Only one respondent thought it was relevant. He concluded that "obtaining a picture is another way of measuring trust".. and that "he would not trust someone without a picture"(2004: 500). Because only one respondent talked about the relevance of pictures, they concluded that it was not as important. However in the case of Couchsurfing one could question if pictures are not as relevant as the other traits. Pictures are an important part of building an online identity. Visual material, such as photo's gives important additional information about the identity of the profile owner"(Siibak 2009, n.p). Furthermore photo's are also used to emphasize the characteristics and qualities that are important and to highlight aspects they included in their textual description of their profile (Siibak 2009).

The last two sources of online trust, pre-commitment and situational factors, are based on Stzompka's (1999) three conditions of derived trustworthiness: accountability, pre-commitment and situational features. The lack of accountability is a problem in online environments, however this characteristic also promotes a higher level of disclosure. Respondents of the study kept emphasizing the importance of self-disclosure "whereby the trustees purposefully changed the context of their own actions by disclosing something personal" (2004:501), thus creating a reciprocal relationship. According to Henderson & Gilden (2004) this pre-commitment made "the leap of faith" easier to take in making a bet on an online friendship" (2004: 505). When placing a bet on the trustworthiness of a person, uncertainty is inherent in this bet. You can never be a hundred percent sure that you know the future actions of a person. This uncertainty was mentioned by Sztompka's (1999) and is also mentioned by Möllering's (2001) concept of "the leap of faith" This leap of faith is the feeling of suspension when trusting a person. How would this placing of trust in a person be affected in the Couchsurfing community, where interaction travels much faster from online to offline

situation?

The last source of creating online trust is based upon situational factors. Henderson & Gilden (2004) agree with Sztompka's (1999) and Giddens (2000) observations that the importance of trust was growing in Western society, this was driven heavily by women's drive for intimacy. For example Giddens (2000) argued that there was a growing importance of the ideal form of the 'pure' relationship. According to Giddens (2000) friendship is the archetypical form of this pure relationship. Friendship is based upon ideal characteristics of flexibility, mutual trust, equality and intimacy. This ideal form of relationships effected the willingness of people to search out online friendship and the willingness to make a bet on somebody's trustworthiness. As Henderson & Gilden (2004) put in their paper: "In other words, 'risk society' promoted the pure relationship, active trust and personal networks. Western societies today place a premium on the type of relationships forged through the internet. Women are especially influential in placing a premium on pure relationships. This is why the respondents in this study, especially the women, were prepared to make a bet on online friendships, notwithstanding the risks" (2004: 504).

There are few points of critique on the work of Henderson & Gilden (2004) I would like to discuss. In their work they make statements based on the work of Giddens (2000) that women are a driving force in the premium that is placed on friendship and intimacy in the Western society. However in their work they also interviewed quite a lot of male respondents. I question if the statement can be made that especially women were prepared to make a bet on online friendships. The sample size was 17 chat room users, of which 9 were females and 8 were males. This sample size is not big enough to make such conclusions. Furthermore the fact that they interviewed 9 respondents exclusively online, could distort the data. As they themselves discussed, on the internet there can be deceit and manipulation of information. A person can easily pretend to be either male or female, even if he or she is not.

Another critical point is that Henderson & Gilden (2004) make a distinction between online and offline friendship. They focus their attention on friendships that develop exclusively in online spaces. However this distinction often obscures what communication technology is actually doing to our social connections. For this reason, Beer (2008) critics the distinction that researchers often make when looking at online friendship and offline friendship. "We cannot think of friendship on social network sites as entirely different and disconnected from our actual friends and notions of friendship, particularly as young people grow up and are informed by the connections they make on social network sites" (Beer 2008: 520). Often online friendships can travel from online to offline spaces, and back again to

online. And that is why researching a community such as Couchsurfing, where people can connect and interact both online and offline could shine new light on how friendships that are mediated by the internet are connected to our actual friends and notions of friendship.

2.4 From online friendship to offline friendships

A research that incorporates the shifting of online to offline spaces in friendship relations, is a study by Tang (2010). His research could help explain why Couchsurfing friendships can feel intense and intimate while at the same time being limited by time and place. He did research on seafarer partners in China who use an internet platform to communicate with other seafarer partners. He suggested that the more spaces the friendship is able to shift to, the more intimate and rewarding it becomes (2010:617). His study argues that online spaces make it easier to meet new friends "with similar others and to do so across time and space", however "offline settings facilitate friendship development"(2010; 629).

Each social setting being it online or offline has is strengths and limitations in making friends. Online, it is easier to find like minded individuals and explore each other's feelings. For example with Couchsurfing it is easier to find people who have similar interest. Couchsurfers can look through profile information and select the interest they find important. As Tang states in the offline world it is more difficult and time consuming to find commonalities. "In the offline world one has to take time to engage others in order to acquire some information from them"(Tang 2010: 621).

Tang (2010) sees the offline shift in friendship as important to create more intimacy. Offline friends can support friends to do joint activities and do practical things together (2010: 629). This could also hold true in Couchsurfing friendship. Tang also suggests in his research that the more spaces a friendship travels to, the more social capital it can provide. With friendship people share resources, knowledge and emotional support.

By focusing on the importance of offline setting for establishing intimate friendships, Tang discusses the importance of geographical location. He states that his respondents found the geographical location important when initiating online friendships (2010: 627). An respondent mentioned she considered the geographical location when choosing an online friend. People who live close by have more possibilities for meeting each other face to face. Concluding that "through cyberspace, Mermaid and Crystal Heart still preferred localized friendship, which led to place specific and more practical social networks" (Tang 2010: 627). Moreover, geographical location is an important factor with Couchsurfing. Before travelling to a place, Couchsurfing members traverse the website searching by location if Couchsurfers

have a place for them to sleep. It is a global community of travelers searching for places to stay based on geographical travel destinations.

2.5 The changing importance of friendship

How do the ideal characteristics of the pure friendships, such as flexibility, equality, mutual trust influence my own research on how friendship is shaped in the Couchsurfing community? Research by Stevens & Tilburg (2010) argued that due to friendships characteristics of being fluid, flexible and voluntary, friendship is the most suitable relationship for modern society. "Since friendship is by its definition a voluntary and flexible relationship, friends are ideally suited for modern life" (Stevens & Tilburg 2010: 4). As society is changing, friendship is more important for keeping your social network intact. "Underlying processes in this change are increased individualization and letting go of traditions" (Stevens & Tilburg 2010: 4) This supported by the diminishing importance of traditional ties, such as the church, family and class (Hoof & Ruyesseveldt 1996, Stevens & Tilburg 2010).

Desai & Kilick (2010) did research on friendship relations in different cultures. In their book 'the ways of friendship' they discus several ethnographic studies on friendship and criticize the perceived link between friendship and modernity. The view that there is a progression from kinship ties to friendship ties is clearly simplifying a complex reality (Desai & Killick 2010:2). Friendship is not a new phenomenon and can be found to exist in several cultures around the world. However friendship can mean different things in different societies, friendship relations can thus "emerge in alternative ways in relation to ideologies of kinship and personhood" (Desai & Killick 2010: 2). Thus in the Western cultures, friendship is often defined in relation to family (Desai & Killick 2010).

By defining friendship in relation to family, certain perceived characteristics of flexibility, equality can be explained. Anthropologist have juxtaposed friendship and family in terms of friendship being flexible and family as fixed and rigid (Coleman & Bell 1999) This distinction is often based on a "western' view of friendship. This is related to the ideals of freedom and flexibility that are often associated with friendship (Coleman & Bell 1999). Family is seen as fixed, because we can't choose who our family is and you can't end the bond whenever you choose. Friendship on the other hand is seen as voluntary, a personal choice. You can pick your friends and you can end the friendship whenever you want.

However can we make these rigorous distinction when it comes to defining friendship? For example how valid is the characteristic of equality to define friendship? In

literature on friendship, equality is often mentioned as the defining characteristic of friendship. Coleman and Bell (1999) give a definition based on equality: '*a special relationship between two equal individuals involved in a uniquely constituted dyad*' (Coleman & Bell 1999:8). By concentrating on equality, friendship is juxtaposed against the often hierarchical construction of family. Equality seems an important factor in shaping and maintaining friendship relations. Nonetheless it is important to understand that friendship can mean different things in different societies. There are societies where friendship is not based on equality. (Killick 2010). Instead the hierarchical construction, that we see as connected to family, could also manifest in friendship. For example Killick (2010) did research on friendship relations in the Mestizos in the Amazone. He states that friendship for the Mestizos was based on hierarchical differences.

So are these characteristics valid for defining friendship relations? Is friendship that flexible and voluntary as we think or is this an ideological projection on the concept itself? Allan (1989) makes a valid point when he questions the unlimited freedom of choice and flexibility within friendship relations in our society. He states that social relations, seen as voluntary, informal and personal are still limited by class, ethnicity, age, gender and geographical location. An example that clarifies Allen's (1989) is that friends often have a lot in common. Friendship's usually develop among people living in proximity to one another and people also tend to be friends with people of similar gender and age. Personally most of my female friends are between the age of 22 and 30, all of them followed or are still following a higher education. Therefore friendship is formed by "the whole interactive complex of material an social constraints that impinge on them….what was termed their immediate social environment"(Allan 1989:47).

The view that real friendship is diminishing because of the use of social networking sites is rooted in our ideal perception of what friendship is. By looking at how friendship is defined in relation to family, it can help explain the use of terms such as flexibility and equality in literature about friendship. It can help us understand why it is so difficult to define and talk about friendship. It is important to keep this in mind when researching friendship relations.

3. The Couchsurfing community

This chapter will discuss what Couchsurfing is, how it works and will delve deeper into the relationship between the Couchsurfing organization and its members. In this chapter I will also analyze how Couchsurfers learn the community rules and renegotiate those rules.

3.1 What is Couchsurfing?

The concept of Couchsurfing is forming an online community of 'friends' that travels from one house to another, sleeping wherever there is room. Following the definition by Ellison & Boyd (2008) Couchsurfing can be defined as a social networking site, where the goal is to meet strangers and help them out with a place to sleep. This is unusual since most social networking sites don't cross from online to face to face interactions in private spaces that quickly. For example Facebook is used to keep in contact with people we first meet offline and less used so to meet new people (Lampe, Ellison, Steinfield 2006). On the other hand Couchsurfing is used to meet people first online and then meet offline in the private space of somebody's home.

According to the Couchsurfing website, Couchsurfing is a "social networking community with an aim to provide a framework for hospitality exchange" (Vaicekauskas 2010:3). Other studies have also defined Couchsurfing as a hospitality exchange network (Cheong 2010, Tan 2010). For example Cheong (2010) defined Couchsurfing as a "hospitality exchange network", also known as "accommodation sharing", or "home stays" (Cheong 2010:2). The use of hospitality is an interesting addition to define Couchsurfing. Hospitality stresses the act of giving and the relationship between the host and guest. In another study Couchsurfing has even been defined as an online cultural exchange community (Rosen 2011), emphasizing the sharing of culture and not specifically focusing on the host and guest relationship.

The focus on sharing of culture is also visible in the Couchsurfing mission statement. "We envision a world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections with the people and places we encounter. Building meaningful connection across cultures enables us to respond to diversity with curiosity, appreciation and respect. The appreciation of diversity spreads tolerance and creates a global community" (Couchsurfing 2014a). As stated, the Couchsurfing organization emphasizes the building of connections with different people from different cultures.

Couchsurfing is the biggest hospitality exchange network in the world with over 7 million members in 207 countries (Couchsurfing 2012a). Even so, the organization has

a lot of competition by other hospitality networks. Another growing hospitality exchange network is Airbnb. Contrary to Couchsurfing, Airbnb has a monetary component to the hospitality exchange. Members go online and find accommodation with other member in exchange for money. One of my hosts, Albert also rented out his Couchsurfing space on Airbnb. Being active on several hospitality exchange sites is not uncommon. An explanation for this shift from Couchsurfing to other sites is the exponential growth of the Couchsurfing community. In 2005 Couchsurfing had over 30.000 members, in 2010 it already had 3 million member and this has grown until the 7 million members in 2014 (Couchsurfing 2012a). Some community member question if Couchsurfing can grow this big without losing its basic values. As a couchsurfer member comments on the recent growth of the community:

"Couchsurfing is no longer a radically inclusive community sharing hospitality… Perhaps this has been the natural evolution of Couchsurfing, after all how does a trust-based community double in size each year, yet still maintain the same values? Whenever I'm at a Couchsurfing event and I hear people say that they "don't feel it's safe to stay in a stranger's house" or that they "don't feel comfortable having a stranger stay in their house", a part of me dies. I now feel like the weird one for having both hosted and surfed with strangers. And I don't blame the number of Couchsurfers who now prefer to "host" via "AirBnB" or "Wimdu"(Roy, n.p. 2013).

A study on the influence of money in hospitality exchange network Airbnb found that the monetary element gave people a sense of control and ease in the exchange of hospitality (Ikalla & Lampinen 2014).

3.2 The Couchsurfing organization, from a non-profit to a B corporation.

Couchsurfing started out as a non-profit organization in 2003 in the United States. On the Couchsurfing website it is stated that Casey Fenton is one of the co-founders of Couchsurfing International and first came up with the idea of using a website to host a online community of travelers in 1999. Casey first tested his concept when he travelled to Iceland. Casey sent out a mass-email to 1500 students in Iceland asking for a place to sleep (Couchsurfing 2014b). How Couchsurfing developed and grew out of this idea, is not mentioned by the organization.

In an interview, Casey Fenton explained how Couchsurfing started out (Roshan 2011). In the early years, Couchsurfing was run by collectives. Collectives are as he explains, "a

group of people working and living together for three months" (Roshan 2011). These collectives consisted mostly of volunteers working together programming the website, philosophizing about Couchsurfing values and how to set up a global travel community. The first collective was held in Montreal and were later held all over the world, for instance New Zealand, New York and Costa Rica. Most of the revenue at that time was from members who paid to be verified, donations and loans.

In the first year Couchsurfing membership grew very slowly to 6000 members, mostly concentrated in the United States. This has grown very quickly after 2004, to 30.000 members in 2005, 3 million member in 2010 and this has grown until 7 million members worldwide in 2014 (Couchsurfing 2012a). The majority of couchsurfers still reside in the United States, around 900.000 Couchsurfers (20%) lived in the US in 2012. The top ten Couchsurfing countries after the US are Germany (9,3%), France (8.4%), Canada (4.1%), England (4.0%), Spain (3.1%), Italy(3.0%), Brazil(2.7%), Australia(2.6%) and Poland (2.3%) (figure 6: Dauntless Jaunter 2012). Although Couchsurfer can be found in 207 different countries, on the map it clearly shows a concentration of members in Western countries.
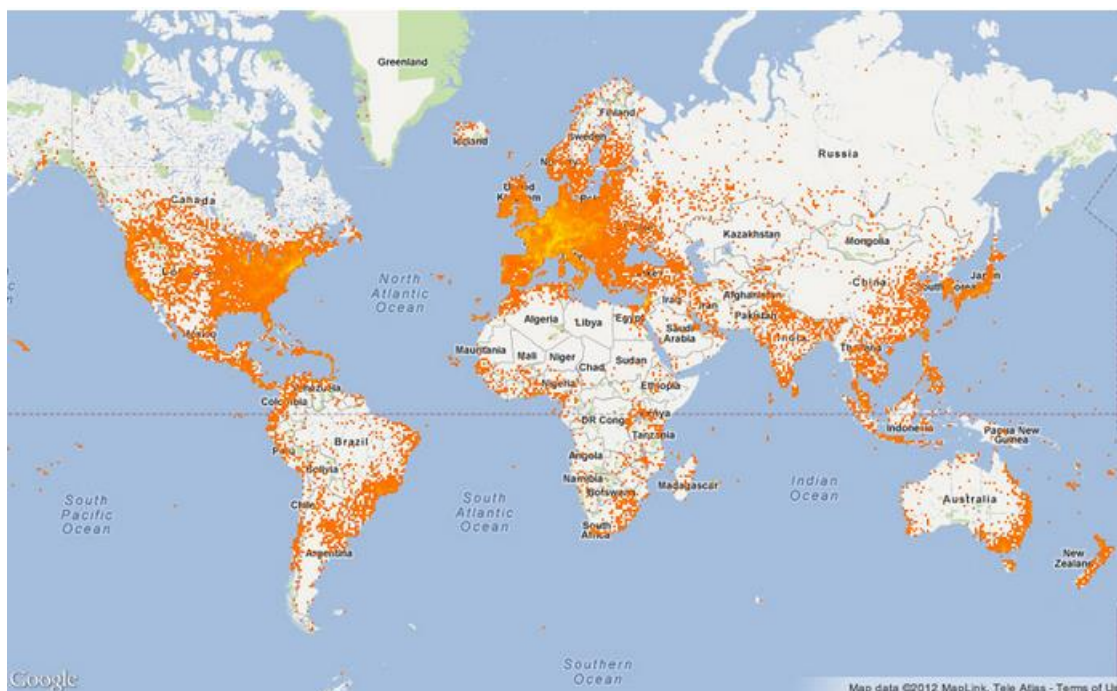

Figure 6: Map of the most concentrated areas of couchsurfers, as of march 2012 (Dauntless Jaunter 2012).

In August 2011 the Couchsurfing organization declared that they were changing from a non-profit organization to a B-organization (Couchsurfing 2012b). This meant that the Couchsurfing organization focused more on the commercial side of the organization. This shift from non profit to profit was necessary because the organization was denied to operate as a non profit in the US. For this reason, the organization accepted a 7,6 million dollars in

investments and became a B corporation. This ´B´ referred to a for benefit organization that is still socially responsible and sustainable for investors and consumers. B corp describes itself as a global movement to change business as a force for good. The organization is active in 33 countries and more than 1000 companies have the B certification.

During my fieldwork I was confronted with resentment by the community over this decision. Many Couchsurfers view themselves as co-owners of their community and were afraid that Couchsurfing would become too commercial. Also online people spoke out against the chances in the Couchsurfing organization, and an example of which is a cartoon by Kominek (2012). For the core of the Couchsurfing community this goal by the Couchsurfing organization of becoming profitable did not fit the Couchsurfing morals of being a free and a voluntary act. Casey Fenton and Daniel Hoffer, now CEO's of the organization, justified their decision to the community stating that the Couchsurfing website could not handle the explosive growth of members. There was a lack of resources, servers and personnel to monitor the growing community. There was a need for new capital to invest in the Couchsurfing website (Kouwenhoven 2012).

This resentment with the commercialization of the community is not new. In July 2006, the Couchsurfing website almost shut down because of a database failure. Back then Couchsurfing was run by volunteers who were very invested in their own community. Therefore they worked together to restore the website (Tan 2010, Arrington 2006). However after this rescue a lot of volunteers left the community in 2007. They disagreed with the organization for making the software behind the Couchsurfing website closed source. This meant that the source code of the website was propriety of the Couchsurfing organization. Community members felt that the source code should be open source, because this aligned with Couchsurfing being a free an voluntary activity (Arrington 2006, Marvelous 2013). Furthermore the fact that the Couchsurfing organization made the source code private propriety prevented other people from leaving the community and starting another hospitality social networking site based on this source code. If the source code is private propriety, Couchsurfing is more interesting as an investment.

The fact that Couchsurfing members have from the beginning protested against commercialization, shows that the involvement of Couchsurfers with the organization has been very high from the beginning. This high involvement with the Couchsurfing organization and the Couchsurfing community is still a core value of the community today. The organization asks Couchsurfing member to contribute to the community by becoming an ambassador and creating events. Also active discussions on how Couchsurfing should be done

and managed by the organization are a part of the online community.

Figure 7: Cartoon of Couchsurfing revolt (Kominek 2012a)

3.3 How does Couchsurfing work?

Before continuing my thesis it is helpful to explain how Couchsurfing works. Couchsurfing revolves around the two main activities of hosting and surfing. Surfers refers to people who are looking for a place to stay and hosts are people who welcome surfers into their homes for 1 to 3 nights. However it is also possible to have a Couchsurfing profile without hosting or surfing. This option is displayed on a profile by a 'coffee mug' image which expresses time to meet for coffee.

Another large part of Couchsurfing revolves around the community forums and events that Couchsurfers can participate in. Couchsurfers can register for several groups, ranging from diverse interests topics such as musicians, gay and lesbian groups or families travelling. The most common groups people register to are regional groups. For me that was the Netherlands group and the Leiden group, the city I live in. I also registered to groups of neighboring cities so I was aware of events that were held nearby. Regional groups have regular events and activities, such as a weekly or monthly meetings to socialize with local Couchsurfers. On those meeting Couchsurfers share life stories, their company, travel experiences, stuff and also knowledge. For example in Leiden there is a weekly language lab,

so people can help each other learn a new language. Couchsurfers in Leiden also help out new foreign students when moving to the Netherlands.

If a Couchsurfer is trying to find a place to sleep, the surfer can search for a host by location. For example when searching for the location Amsterdam, a list Couchsurfing profiles appears. Surfers can search through the list and select hosts they like based on location, age an information on the profile. They then have to send each potential host a (personalized) couchrequest. The host can send a message back and decide between three options: to decline, say maybe or accept the couchrequest.

Due to the investments described in the next chapter, the Couchsurfing website structure underwent a lot of changes during my fieldwork. New features such as other ways of connecting with Couchsurfing members and finding hosts while travelling were added. One of these new features was the Couchsearch. With the Couchsearch people who are looking for a place to stay in a city can describe who they are and what kind of host they are looking for. Potential hosts can browse through this and sent surfers messages if they have a couch available. This is different from the couchrequest in which the potential surfer send a personalized couchrequest to a host they like. It is similar to emergency couchrequests that surfer post in regional forums when they are trying to find a host short notice.

Below is an example of a couchrequest I send to my host Bart.

Bart Hoorn, Netherlands

Age: 52
Gender: Male
Grew up in: Cooma, Australia
References: 14
Friends: 12

Details

City: Hoorn, Noord-Holland, Netherlands

Arrival Date:	02/08/2012
Departure Date:	02/10/2012
Number of Surfers:	1
Arriving Via:	Train
Status:	Accepted

 [Maaike Van Heijningen](#) January 31st, 2012 - 2:57 pm

 Ik stuur even een couchrequest om de afspraak overzichtelijker voor mij te maken. Anders raak ik straks in de war met andere data die ik met mensen heb afgesproken.

Ik vind het inderdaad geweldig dat ik met mijn opleiding de vrijheid heb om een onderwerp als Couchsurfing te nemen. Dan blijf je ook enthousiast. Lijkt mij ook leuk om meer over Hoorn te horen, ik ben er namelijk zelf nog nooit geweest. Toch gek hoe je je hele leven in een land kan wonen, maar toch op zo weinig plekken ben geweest.

Ik laat nog weten hoe laat ik aankom. Ik denk in de middag, ik weet niet wat voor jou het beste uitkomt. Mijn telefoonnummer is 0██████████.

Tot snel,

Maaike

This was Bart his reaction to my message:

Bart

January 31st, 2012 - 10:10 pm
Dag Maaike,

Bij deze dan de bevestiging. Ik hou zelf ook van orde en overzichtelijkheid, vooral met CS afspraken is het vaak handig om voor jezelf en tegenover anderen toch soms overduidelijk te zijn wat de afspraken betreft. Een misverstandje zit vaak in een klein hoekje...

Je bent welkom hier aan te komen op welke tijdstip je het beste uitkomt. Ik woon vlakbij het station, als je me belt of een SMS stuurt kan ik je komen ophalen. Mijn huistelefoonnummer is ▮▮▮▮▮▮, mijn mobiel ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

Nederland is een klein landje maar toch wel heel groot af en toe, er zijn nog een heleboel plaatsen waar ik nog nooit ben geweest in de 32 jaar dat ik in Nederland woon. Nu ik wat vaker weg ben met fotograferen kom ik ook weleens ergens, ook met behulp van CS'ers tegenwoordig. ;-)

OK, ik hoor van je hoe de plannen zich ontwikkelen. Fijne avond verder en tot gauw.

Groetjes,
Bart

Figure 8: Print screen of my couch request conversation with Bart

Sending a personalized couchrequest is a process. On the Couchsurfing website it is explained how you should write a good couchrequest. First you have to read the information on the profile of your potential host, you have to think about if you're life style would fit with the host. On the suggestions of the Couchsurfing website they explain that "you are asking to be a guest in someone's home, which means you will need to adapt to their environment" (Couchsurfing 2014). The organization also recommends that you send a personalized request in which you answer why you would like to stay with this specific host. This answering why you would like to stay at a specific host is not based on location, but finding common interests. This request is the first thing a host sees and is very helpful in deciding if he or she want to meet or host you. It is the first step in a conversation to get to know one another online, so the first offline meeting and hosting will go smoothly.

Bart was one of the respondents who reacted to my message on the forum. So we talked by messaging system before I send him this couchrequest. Additionally you can still see that besides exchanging of information like phone number and where he lives, the conversation is also about aligning our expectations, finding common interests and about getting to know one another. As Bart explains in his second message, with Couchsurfing it is important to make clear agreements when it comes to Couchsurfing, so misunderstandings

can be avoided. During my fieldwork I encountered this problem of having misunderstandings with my Couchsurfer Anmar. He thought I was coming on another date, while I thought something different.

The messaging system and the couchrequest are the only communication applications the couchsurfing website supports. Henderson & Gilden (2004) describe this form of communication as asynchronous communication. This means there is time between the receiving and writing of the messages. Similarly Tang (2010) also reflects on this form of communication and what its effect is on building an intimate connection. He states that in the case of the seafarer's website, there is a messaging system to communicate. He observes that this messaging system constrains friendship performances online by not supporting instant communication (2010:622). The result is that intense and intimate exchange of messages is uncommon. This is also observable on the Couchsurfing website.

However as can be seen in the couchrequest message of Bart, telephone numbers are exchanged. Consequently this means that the conversation can move from the Couchsurfing website to another means of communication. Likewise, Tang (2010) observed that seafarer conversations often move from the seafarer's website to other social spaces, such as a Chinese instant messaging system (named QQ). On the QQ space seafarers can cultivate their relationships by supporting continuous engagement. This enables them to share more freely their feelings and concerns (Tang 2010: 622). While Tang described the moving of the conversation to other social spaces as an indication that the social bond can grow more intimate, Couchsurfer mainly exchange telephone numbers to coordinate the meeting place and time for hosting. For instance, I used the mobile phone to send text messages to announce that I was running late or that I was on my way to the meeting spot. I did not use the mobile phone to start a conversation. Only after the face to face hosting is over, it sometimes occurs that the conversation can shift to other online spaces. For example, my host in Groningen added me on Facebook after I stayed with him for a few days.

3.4 Couchsurfing guidelines: Learning the community rules

The Couchsurfing organization provides community guidelines and tips to new members (Appendix 1, 2). These tips and guidelines are found on the Couchsurfing website (Couchsurfing 2014c, Couchsurfing 2014g). This provides newcomers with information on how Couchsurfing works and the core values of Couchsurfing. There are a lot of guidelines and tips, I will discuss a few of the important values and concern that my respondents shared with me.

An important guideline in the Couchsurfing community is that a surfer should always express appreciation to its host. This is often stated on the website. To do that a surfer could bring a gift for its host, as a thank you for the stay. This is not obligatory, however it is considered to be good manners to do so. The gift does not have to be material. If you are unable to bring something it is also possible to give back by cooking a meal, doing the dishes or paying for drinks or food when going out. I included this custom in my film when I gave Albert a plant as thank you for the stay (time code 31:10). I gave him a plant when I left because when I was filming I accidently knocked over a plant the day before. He thanked me for the plant and seemed happy with it.

When I was surfing a place I also tried to think of gifts that my hosts would appreciate. Mostly I brought a bottle of wine or some beer. It is not always easy to think of a gift for your host. When I surfed at Anmar´s place, I forgot that he stated in his profile that he never drinks any alcohol. I initially bought some beers. When I was standing on the train platform ready to go to Diemen I suddenly realized that Anmar doesn't drink any alcohol. In a bit of a panic I walked into the shops to find another gift. Luckily, I remembered that he mentioned he was trying to improve his Dutch. Therefore I bought him a book "Taal is zeg maar echt mijn ding" by Paulien Cornelisse. The book describes how the Dutch language is used in different situations, how the language constantly changes and how this can result in funny situations. Anmar thanked me for the book, but did not seem very interested in it.

This counter gift or sharing time is not obligatory, it is a suggestion made by the Couchsurfing organization. Nonetheless, I learned that even though it is not obligatory, the giving back to your host is very important for the community. This was the first aspect Kerstin explained to me when I asked how Couchsurfing works. She said I should always bring something, cook a meal or clean the dishes. I also encountered this expectation for example when I was visiting Anmar. After the meal he asked me, so when are you going to do the dishes. Suggesting I was not quick enough to suggest doing it myself.

Another issue that a lot of my respondents addressed is that Couchsurfing is not the same as staying at a hotel or hostel. All the Couchsurfer hosts appreciated it when a couchrequest is personalized and not copy-pasted and send to a lot of different people. Related to this concern of not being seen as a hostel or hotel is that surfer should make time to spend with his host. By giving a gift, sharing time together or doing the dishes as a surfer you give something back to the host. So even though there is no monetary exchange, there is still a reciprocal exchange between a host and a surfer.

The organization is trying to guide the community by giving guidelines and rules of

conduct so every member can learn the values of Couchsurfing. However these rules are also reproduced by community member themselves. An example is a cartoon by Kominek (2012), explaining with her cartoon what Couchsurfing is and what the rules are to new members and outsiders. I will show a few of her drawings and explain it.
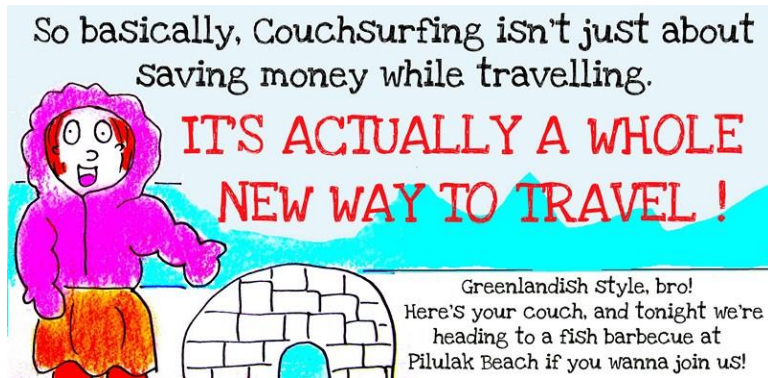

Figure 9: Couchsurfing cartoon by Kominek (2012b) "What is Couchsurfing by the way"

Figure 10: Couchsurfing cartoon by Kominek (2012b) "What is Couchsurfing by the way"

With the first cartoon she addresses the concern by the organization that people use it so get a free accommodation. But by saying it isn't just about saving money, she does address why a lot of people started Couchsurfing. People do use it so save money on hostels and accommodation, however it is not appropriate to just do it for this reason. The second concern is also mentioned by the organization, on the website, rule 4: "Don't Go Looking for a Date**.** Our members join Couchsurfing to create friendships. Don't contact other members for dating – we will consider this harassment" (Couchsurfing 2014c). The Couchsurfing organization does not approve of people using it for dating, however as Kominek (2012b) shows with her cartoon, this does happen a lot. People meet each other during Couchsurfing and some even get married.

4. Couchsurfing, friendship and trust

This chapter will discuss my fieldwork observations and interviews about Couchsurfing. First, I will analyze my profile and the choices I made in building my online identity. Then I will discuss the relationship between trust, safety and Couchsurfing. In the end I will examine how Couchsurfing is used as a dating site and how friendship comes into play in the Couchsurfing community.

4.1 Making my profile, the first steps of becoming a Couchsurfing member

A profile gives a lot of information to a host. It can be used to tell a lot about a person and pays a role in determining if a Couchsurfer can be trusted. I will start with an analysis of my own profile. The image below is the starting template for my Couchsurfing profile. On the left side you can state general information about yourself, such as my gender, age, occupation and where one lives. On the right side you can show a picture of yourself. It is also possible to add additional pictures you would like to share.
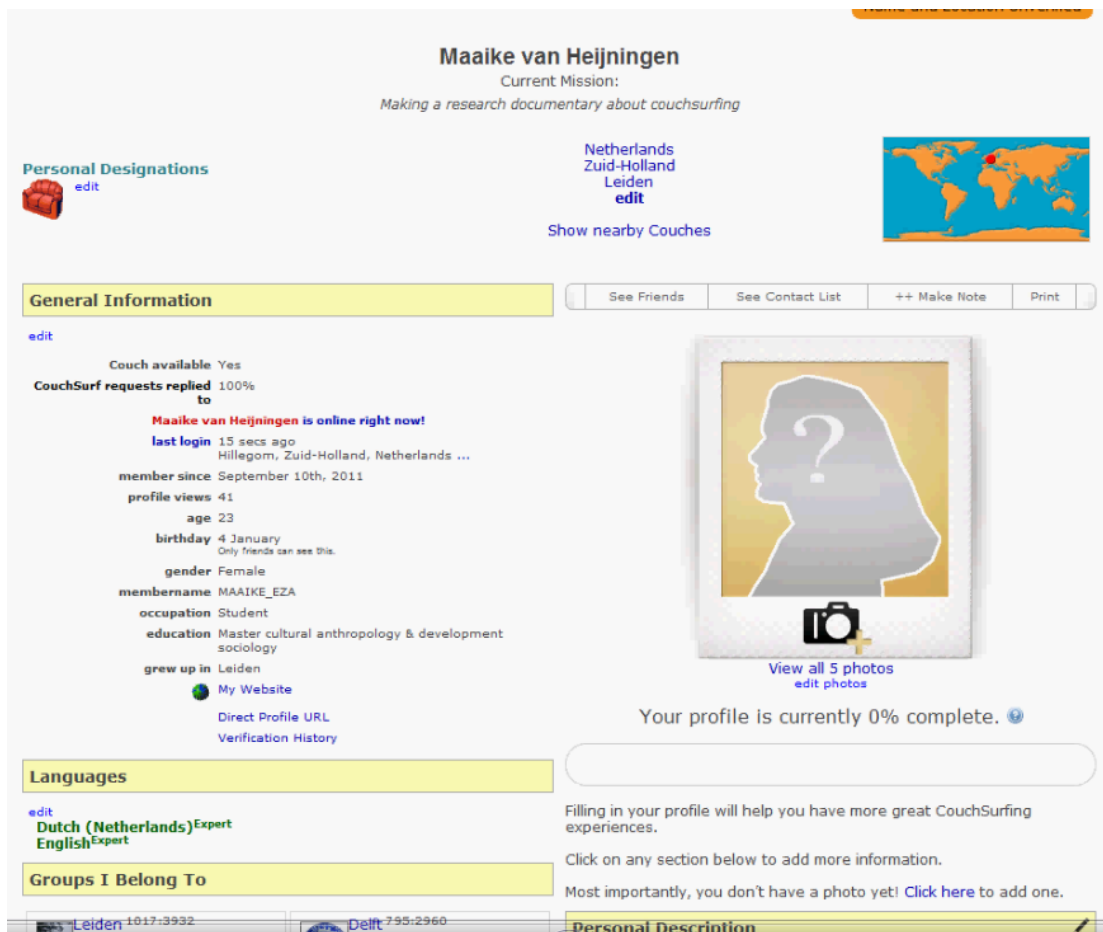

Figure 11: Print screen of my Couchsurfing profile template before filling it in

Personalizing a profile takes a lot a time. It is important to think about how to describe

yourself to the community. This process of making my profile is the starting point of the film which is part of this thesis. The process of filling out the profile is extensive. I think it took me a few hours to fill out the sections on my profile. My profile is displayed in the screenshot below. As Susanne jokingly said during one of many discussion: "it is very similar to filling out a profile on a dating website, they want to know everything". It is similar to a dating site profile because a Couchsurfing profile has to be a reflection of your offline identity. A lot more information is given on a dating profile as well as a Couchsurfing profile then compared to for example a Facebook profile. I think because the point is to meet new people, a bit more information is given to see if common interest can be found. As Henderson & Gilden (2004) mentioned, people online can have a reputation and can be based on performance by their pseudonym identity.

The Couchsurfing organization tries to help with the process of filling in the profile with a few guidelines of what is useful to include. As the Couchsurfing organization recommends: "you profile is your face in the Couchsurfing community , and it's also the first place to start creating positive experiences. Take time with it" (Couchsurfing 2014d). The organization finds 4 things important, you have to give a detailed personal description, include photographs, a detailed couch description and your house rules. The personal description is the first thing I wrote. To get some inspiration the Couchsurfing organization recommended to read other people's profile. I scanned through a few profiles and found that most members gave a general description of who they are, often telling that they are open minded and love to meet new people. Thus, the Couchsurfing community takes shape through the expectations of what profiles adhere to. For this reason I also included this in my profile. I tried to keep my description short, to the point and also relate it to my research subjective.
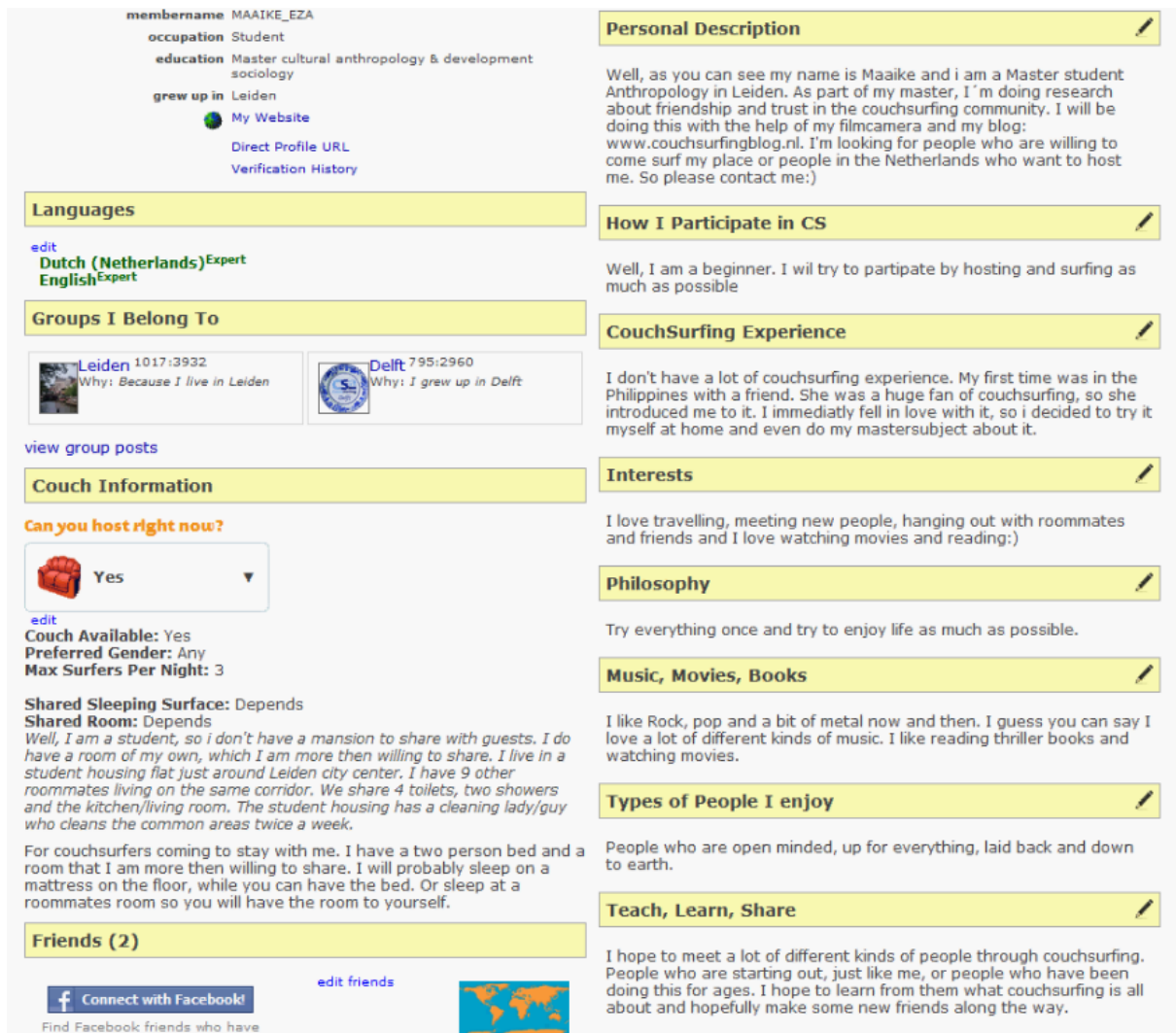
Figure 12: Print screen after I have filled in my information on my Couchsurfing profile template

Since I wanted a complete profile, I also included pictures of myself. This can be seen on the screenshot below (time code 02:00). I felt that pictures are an important part of creating, an online identity and creating trust. I included pictures of myself filming, my couch, my room, my roommates and myself while I was travelling. I found that pictures are important part to create an online appearance of an individual (Siibak 2009). With the pictures I tried to show myself being adventurous as a traveler. Being a traveler is an important part of Couchsurfing. I also wanted to include my roommates, because the Couchsurfers who would become my guest would have to deal with them. Furthermore I wanted to include a picture of me and my film camera so that the Couchsurfers I hosted or visited could already get an impression of me filming. As Siibak (2009) argued in his study, pictures are an important part of building an online identity and emphasizing the thing and qualities I found important.

Although the Couchsurfing organization gives tips on what to write in the profile, it

does not screen for unwanted behavior, language or photo's on the website. I questioned a representative of the Couchsurfing organization during my fieldwork about the safety issues with Couchsurfing. She replied "Members are active participants in a safe community and readily report abuse to Couchsurfing, either through Contact Us or the Report Abuse button" (Rachel 2012) This means that the organization gives guidelines on what is appropriate behavior, but does not actively screen for it online. For example with pictures and language it is stated in the terms of use of Couchsurfing (Couchsurfing 2014e) that any content that is uploaded on the site should not be "unlawful, illegal, nude or sexual explicit content or incite violence, ect…"(Couchsurfing 2014e). In addition the organization relies on active members to screen for this behavior and report it. However I found that the organization rarely intervene by deleting content and profiles themselves, they first want community member to resolve the issue. This is different than compared to other sites such as Facebook. Facebook also relies on members to report abuse and offensive pictures. Yet Facebook has an extensive list on what they find offensive and delete picture and profiles very regularly.
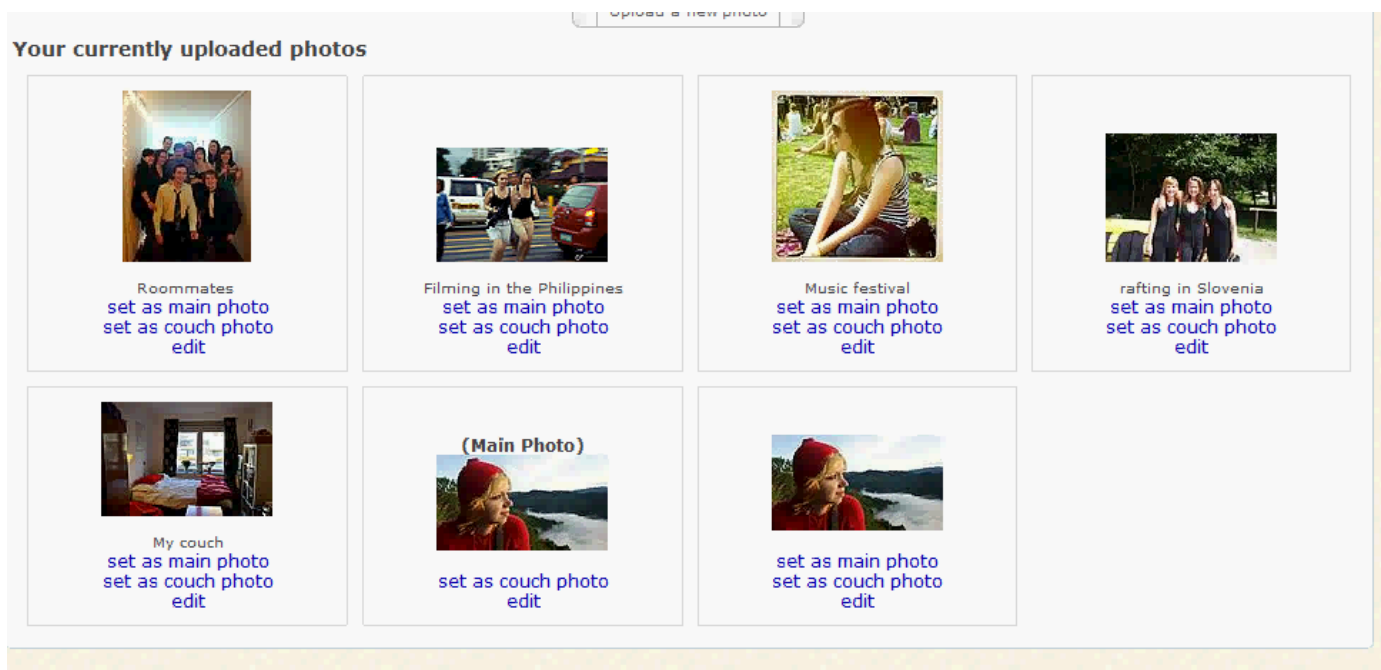

Figure 13: Print screen of the photo's I uploaded on my Couchsurfing profile

4.2 Safety precautions and broken trust

When I first joined the Couchsurfing community, the structure of the website had three different methods to determine somebody's credibility. As a user you have to determine if a person is telling the truth on his profile. When Couchsurfing you are asking yourself is this person who he says he is and if you can trust this person.

The first and the simplest method is credit card verification. The point of verification is to verify my credentials and address. This verification is optional. When I started, I verified my account for the sake of my research. I learned through the online discussions on the website that verification said nothing about how trustworthy I am. It is often criticized for being easily manipulated and a way to enforce donations (All that is wrong 2010). After three weeks I got a postcard through the mail with my confirmation number. I filled in the confirmation number and added my confirmation number it to my Couchsurfing profile. Then a green check mark symbol appeared in the corner of my profile to signify I was verified.

The second method to see how trustworthy I am as a Couchsurfer is the personal references. References are one of the most often used tools by Couchsurfers to determine how safe and trustworthy a person is. Couchsurfers can write personal references after they have met the person in question face to face. References are a source of information for other surfers who are thinking about staying with a host or meeting a Couchsurfer. Couchsurfers can choose to write a positive, neutral or a negative reference about another Couchsurfer. In my fieldwork I got around 10 positive references and no negative ones. After each Couchsurfing experience, I would write a reference to my host. This can be seen in the film.

Although references are an important part of the feedback system, it is a personal decision to write a negative or a positive reference. An often mentioned problem was that the positive references were too positive and did not describe specifics of what actually happened during the encounter. Some people wrote a positive reference for others they haven't met in real life or they would write a positive reference based on what previous members have written in a reference. Writing a negative reference is also not a clear cut decision. For example the first time I had to decide whether or not I should write a bad reference was with my first surfer. He was suppose to stay at my place for a night, however he never showed up. I was waiting for him for hours and I did not have a phone number I could call. After a few hours waiting he wrote me a message telling me he decided to sleep over at a friend's place. I questioned if I should write a bad reference. The Couchsurfing organization recommends only to write a bad reference when people have met face to face. However I still felt it was not appropriate to not let me know on time that he was not coming. In the end I wrote a neutral

reference telling my experience of my contact with the Couchsurfer.

Negative references give a lot of information about a possible threat to the rest of the community. A negative reference can only be deleted by the person who wrote the reference. Anmar and Albert both said that when you have 3 negative references your online Couchsurfing reputation is ruined. Negative references will have a negative effect on the amount of couchrequests you will receive and your chances of finding a host while travelling.

However the reference system is not fool proof. The Couchsurfing organization warns about people who create multiple Couchsurfing profiles. By making another profile, Couchsurfers can easily avoid the referencing system. For example Anmar told me about a person with the screen name Rhino in Amsterdam. He is an experienced Couchsurfer who prefers to host female Couchsurfers. Anmar said that Rhino made a second profile after he received 3 negative references. Thereby he could escape the online stigma and avoid that less Couchsurfers would come. His new profile already has hundreds of new friends and references. He got one negative reference from a woman accusing him of stealing her ATM card and sexual intimidation. Thus the referencing system has its limitations for creating safety.

The third method is personal vouching. Vouching is a vote of trust Couchsurfers can give to other Couchsurfing members. Only a person that has been vouched for three times can vouch for other people that they deem trustworthy. I personally have not been vouched for. Vouching usually only happens when people know each other for longer periods of time. For example Susanne said that she only vouches for someone when she feels a strong connection or when she thinks somebody is a ´real´ Couchsurfer who needs her help to start his or her profile. Albert also notes the importance of vouching: "You only give your vouch to people who you think are a 100 percent trustworthy. Not only to people who you feel safe with, but also when you feel that the next person can feel safe when they are sleeping at their home" (time code 30:00).

These feedback methods were added to the Couchsurfing system to create a network of information that people can use to be safe. However this does not guarantee nothing bad can happen when you are Couchsurfing. It is still possible that you could meet people that steal or intent to hurt you in some way. The Couchsurfing organization posted some tips and safety guidelines to follow before and during Couchsurfing. These tips and guidelines describe that you should prepare as much as possible and collect as much information as you can on a host or surfer, have a conversation and communicate before meeting face to face. In addition it is recommended to spend some time with your host or surfer upon meeting each

other.

For female Couchsurfers the risk of being attacked, hurt or raped is something to consider. In my film, Susanne discusses the trust issues for women while Couchsurfing. When she was a Couchsurfing ambassador in London she regularly had to help out young women who got in trouble after a male host behaved inappropriately or wanted sexual favors. They were often kicked out by their host or decided to leave themselves. Sometimes they were unable to find another place to sleep. Susanne explained that female Couchsurfer should be strong and independent. "When you don´t like something, you have to decide to leave and even sleep on the street if you have to". She also told me of about her own Couchsurfing experience when a guy she hosted crawled into her bed and tried to have sex with her. She kicked him out on the street and wrote him a negative reference (time code 36:12)

An often cited story that circulates on the Couchsurfing message boards is of a female Couchsurfer being raped by a male while surfing in England (Brooke 2012). The female Couchsurfer travelled through Europe and used Couchsurfing to find places to sleep. She send out a couchrequest to a Moroccan male living in Leeds. They arranged to meet, had a drink and cooked a meal together. After dinner he started to display inappropriate behavior by trying to dance with her. She declined and prepared to go to bed. He then entered her room with the excuse that he wanted to show her some pictures. Instead of showing the pictures he attacked her, raped her twice and threatened to kill her. The community reacted to this story by sending warnings out to every group forum, warning females to be aware of this particular Couchsurfer. On the group forums, community members also criticized the Couchsurfing organization for not deleting the male's profile after it happened. Couchsurfing members said they reported him to the organization, but found it odd that the organization reacted so late in removing the male's profile.

The safety issue for women also became apparent when I had my second Couchsurfing experience in the Philippines. Kerstin and I were staying with at a Couchsurfer who tried to touch Kerstin inappropriately. He arranged for us to spend the night in a beachside resort that was owned by his friends. Because there only was one room we had to share. The host asked us if it was a problem if he slept in the same room. We did not think much of it and weren't concerned with him staying in the room. Kerstin told me that during the second night he suddenly put his hand near her crotch and just left it there. She was so surprised and shocked by this, that she did not dare to move and pretended to be vast asleep. Luckily he decided to move his hand after a few uncomfortable minutes. Because we felt he did not do it on purpose, Kerstin did not wrote him a negative reference.

While Couchsurfing and filming for my thesis I also encountered moments that would make me feel uncomfortable. For example Anmar was very open with talking about sex. Within the first hour of meeting, he asked me if I ever went to a sex club and he also gave me a tour of the red light district. In the film, Anmar talks about his own awkward and inappropriate experiences with Couchsurfers (time code 19:30)

"Anmar I told you about the kiwi girl. The thing I did not tell you about, the same day I made up a plan to have a day off. I came back I found her doing something.

M: Ok you found her doing something?

Anmar: She had turned on my computer and she was playing the L word[2] and she was naked in the middle of the living room with her legs open"(time code 19:30)

During and after Couchsurfing Anmar's place, It still felt like I could trust him and we had a nice time. However I did feel he was testing to see what kind of girl I was. Trust and feeling comfortable during Couchsurfing is a delicate matter. It all depends on the intentions of the Couchsurfers meeting. There is no system that guarantees complete safety. However giving trust to a stranger, never knowing what will happen and interacting with different people from different backgrounds is what makes Couchsurfing enjoyable and exciting to a lot of Couchsurfers. It is about placing a bet on if a person is trustworthy and feeling rewarded when your bet was right. It also feels rewarding to place trust in the Couchsurfing system itself.

4.3 Taking a leap of faith

Research by Tun (2010) analyses the renegotiation of trust in the Couchsurfing community. Trust is an important aspect to Couchsurfing, however a lot of Couchsurfers find it difficult to explain the workings of trust. Every Couchsurfing has their own way of making judgments about trustworthiness of other Couchsurfers (Tun 2010:376). I found that when I asked my respondents how they would read a Couchsurfing profile, the trust issue was not specifically mentioned. As Turn states: "the filtering that usually happens is based on the consideration about whether they might like the other person, or the level that they think they might "click". Therefore demographic factors are mentioned, especially age, and occasionally gender" (2010:375). Moreover this click or liking of the person was mentioned by several of my respondents. For example Bart notes in the film (time code 09:30) the bond he feels with people during Couchsurfing. "If I can choose people based on a potential click, I will. But

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[2] L word is an American drama show about a group of Lesbian's in Los Angeles.

when I am asked as a host, I often take the risk"(time code 10:20).

Tun (2010) applies Möllering, suspension for trust idea to analyze trust in the Couchsurfing community. The leap of faith is a concept by Mollering to examine the feeling of trust as the suspension of uncertainty. The quote Bart makes about taking a risk is a perfect example of what Tun calls "the leap of faith" (2010:377). He notes that Couchsurfers can "bracket out irreducible social vulnerability and uncertainty as if they were favorably resolved" (Möllering, 2006,115). In the eyes of this Couchsurfer, he is aware of the potential risks but he chooses to focus on himself as being able to handle it, and performs the act of trust"(2010:377).

Furthermore it is interesting to observe that trust can be an intrinsic aspect of the Couchsurfing experience. Susanne for example would invite Couchsurfers over at her place without even looking in close detail at their profiles, pictures and references. When I asked her if she was concerned as a female for her safety, she replayed that she extends a certain level of trust to people who are on the Couchsurfing website and who she labels as a Couchsurfer. She compared it to meeting people at the bar. "When I am at a Couchsurfing meeting, I talk to a lot of new people. However when I am on a normal night out, I would not talk to every stranger. I feel more scared. With Couchsurfing I know we have something in common. With people I meet in the bar, I would not be sure if we have anything to talk about". Couchsurfing cultivates trust by creating a feeling of belonging with its members. As Tang (2010) described with his seafarers community, "they shared with their online friends a "common language" because they had a common identity and similar experiences. Such a feeling implies that seafarer partners are able to understand and identify with their online friends easily" (2010: 623).

Couchsurfers often value the trust they can put in the Couchsurfing community. In the audiovisual material Susanne told me the story of her new year eve party. It got a bit hectic when 60 Couchsurfers were invited to the party. She got intoxicated and gave the key to a few sober Couchsurfing friends. She said: "I only remember waking up at 5 am en everybody was going home. My house was totally clean. After everybody left, a few Couchsurfer friends had cleaned my whole apartment. The door was closed, I was neatly tucked into my bed. It was total trust, with your eyes closed. Being able to trust people completely. I really think that this is nice" (time code 34:00) Likewise, Bart noted that he likes Couchsurfing because of the trust. "There is less security, few safety nets when Couchsurfing. For a short amount of time, you are a part of somebody's life"(time code 07:10).

During my fieldwork I likewise had to trust other Couchsurfers and the Couchsurfing

community. I often felt a sense of excitement before meeting the 'stranger' face to face. I felt the risk I was about to take as enjoyable. As I said before it felt comforting to put trust in another person and be rewarded by kindness and a good time. I felt a sense of comfort when my online impression of the person was confirmed face to face. In the film you often see me nervous before and during the actual meeting. The nervousness resulted in shaky images and nervous behavior of my first encounter with Bart (time code 03:38) and Albert (time code 22:00)

4.4 Couchsurfing, sex and hooking up

During my fieldwork I discovered that some Couchsurfers use the Couchsurfing platform to find sexual partners. This act is frowned upon by the Couchsurfing organization and by members of the community. In the Couchsurfing guidelines this issue is also taken into account. In the community guidelines under rule 4 "don´t go looking for a date" it is stated that: "Our members join Couchsurfing to create friendships. Don´t contact other members for dating – we will consider this harassment." (Couchsurfing 2014c). I mentioned this before in the community guidelines.

Research by Cheong (2010) and articles by Zigos (2013) also reported that it was not uncommon for Couchsurfers to hook-up and have sex. As Cheong (2010) notes in his study "The administrators of CS regulate users, stipulating that users cannot seek romantic experience through Couchsurfing. But this is what occasionally happens, even if both parties did not intend to do so in the beginning" (Cheong 2010: 13).

Surprisingly this issue is not as clear cut in the everyday experience of Couchsurfing members. I was often confronted by stories of people using Couchsurfing to find sexual partners. For example one of my friends told me that she knew a guy that used it exclusively to find attractive girls he could have sex with. Even though I can't confirm if there is any truth to these kinds of stories, it is apparent that Couchsurfing is viewed by some as a potential dating website.

Not every Couchsurfer approves of using Couchsurfing for sexual relationships. In the audiovisual part of my thesis I asked Susanne what she thinks of people using Couchsurfing for sex and hooking up. She has a really strong opinion of people who call it a dating website: "Those people need to be put down. I find it really awful. It really makes me mad". When I asked why, she stated that "I try to fit it in my life, in a really platonic and based on friendship kind of way. It has nothing to do with sex and then there are these annoying guys. They are usually guys, by the way, that think they can just crawl into

your bed and sleep there. However he is only allowed to sleep in your home. I think that is a really big difference" (time code 37:05).

It was interesting to observe that every respondent had a slightly different attitude towards seeing and using Couchsurfing for sex and dating. For example Anmar was the opposite of Susanne when it comes to having sex with other Couchsurfers. In the film I talked about Anmar's profile and his cryptic messages below the 'amazing thing I've done' section. Below is a picture included of his amazing thing I've done section.
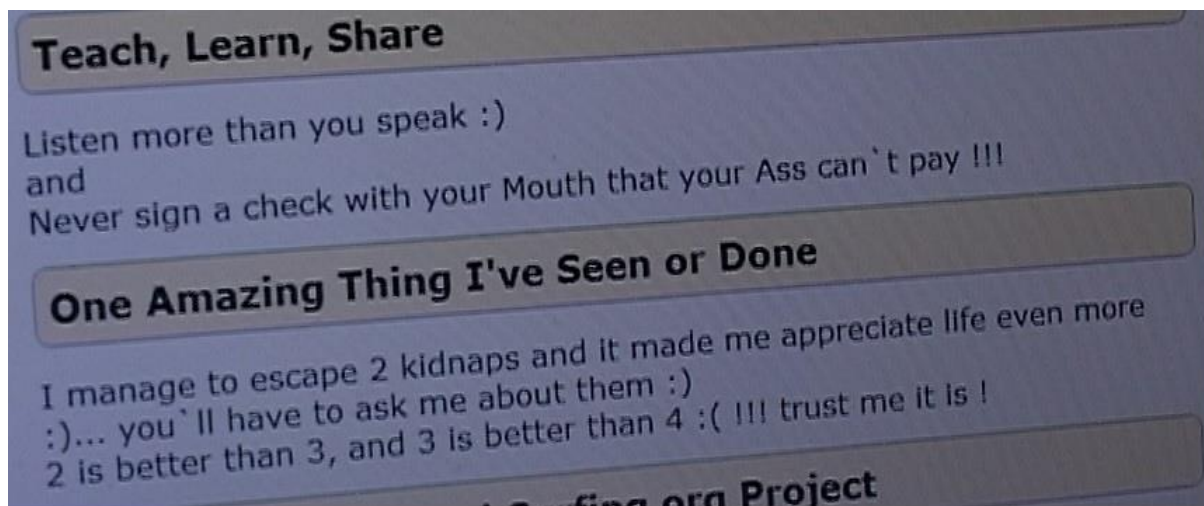

Figure 14: Screenshot of Anmar's profile from the film Flexible friendship in the   Couchsurfing community

During one of the conversations I had Anmar, he opened up to me on what the hidden meaning is behind the sentence. It was a reference to a sexual experience he had with other female Couchsurfers. He mentioned that he had sex with two lesbian Couchsurfers and another heterosexual girl. He also stated that he had sex with two other female Couchsurfers on two other separate occasions.

Can you select your host or guest on if he is open to a sexual encounter during Couchsurfing. The example of Anmar his profile shows that he publicly communicated the information on his profile that he was open to a sexual encounter. This was not openly stated, but hidden behind a secret meaning.

The topic of Couchsurfing being used as a dating application has been an often debated topic by Couchsurfing members. Some find that it goes against the idealistic Couchsurfing principles of friendship. Others are more open to the possibilities that it can happen, while there are also people actively pursuing sex through Couchsurfing.

Not surprisingly I observed that there is a gender bias when trying to find a host. It has been often stated that it is easier for young women to find a host then for an older male.

During my fieldwork I also experienced this difference. I had a fairly easy time finding male hosts after I posted a message on the Netherlands group forum. But in order to find a female host, I had to approach several female Couchsurfers before Susanne agreed to let me stay at her place. This problem is also acknowledged by male Couchsurfers. They are easier in accepting a female without references than male Couchsurfers without references.

Couchsurfers have different motives for inviting either female or male Couchsurfers. One of my respondents Bart has several motives for Couchsurfing. Bart notes that he likes Couchsurfers because he can be a part of somebody's life for a short and sometimes intense amount of time. However he has an ulterior motive that does relate to the gender bias. He states that Couchsurfing is helping him talk to women. "Couchsurfing is also used as a dating system. For me it is a way to confront my fears. I have anxiety when I talk to women, I am a nervous guy. But now I learn to be a bit more relaxed when it comes to the situation" (time code 14:00).

4.5 Flexible Friendships in the Couchsurfing community

In the beginning of the thesis I talked about friendship and if we can call the people we meet through Couchsurfing friends? The Couchsurfing organization refers and uses friendship regularly to describe the Couchsurfing connection people have during hosting and surfing. An example is the slogan: "You have friends all over the world, you just haven't met them yet" (Couchsurfing 2014f). Furthermore the Couchsurfing organization described the social connection people have during hosting and surfing. They use words such as calling the connection meaningful and kind. (Couchsurfing 2014a).

When I asked my respondents to describe and explain these Couchsurfing encounters in their daily lives, they talked about the connection as being flexible, short, casual, without obligations and intense. Sometimes they would use the word friend, but more often they would call it a friendly encounter with a possibility of 'real' friendship.

CouchSurfing Experience

The only problem that I have with couchsurfing, is that I keep falling in love with other CSers.
Not in a sexual sort of way, just in a "WOW, what an amazing and wonderful person, I want
to spend 10 more hours with him/her" sort of way. And then, in a day, or a week, they are
out of my life and move on to their next adventure. Never to be seen again.
****
I tell it like it is because I don't know any other way to be. I am a bit shy, and can act a bit
crazy when out having fun with friends. If you embarass easily, don't take me out in public!
****
I love, with every fiber of my being. I have more passion than almost anyone you will meet.
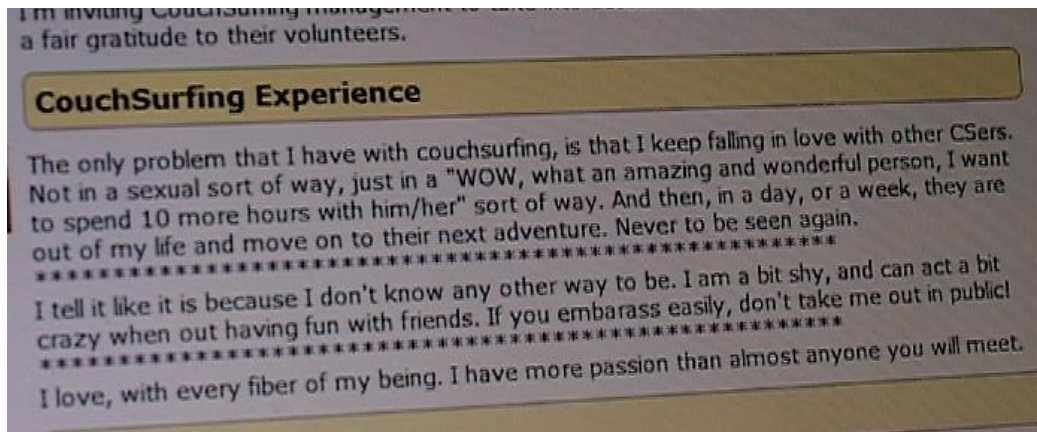
Figure 15: Screenshot of Albert's profile from the film Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community (time code 27:01)

For example Albert mentions in the film his view on the connections he makes with people during Couchsurfing. "I put it in my profile, sometimes you think, wow these as such amazing people, you just want to hold them. But you know they are leaving. Then after they left, 2 days after, you still have not forgotten them. However they have had 2 or 3 other host and they are further along on their journey. It is often a short and very intense encounter. I really think these kinds of interactions are really enjoyable, but also without obligations" (time code 27:02).

Susanne on the other hand would often call the connection 'superficial', without dept. Bart also had difficulty describing the relationship he had with other Couchsurfers. He started out describing the relationship as without obligation, as free. "For a short time, you are very intensely occupied with that person and then after that it's ok" (time code 08:10). He also stated that he would often not feel a real 'click' with people (time code 09:30) "You have a lot of different people, are polite to each other, but there it not a real click" I asked him why he does not feel a connection. He responded with: "Personality differences, in daily life you also have people you can deal with better. Nothing that other people can do, but sometimes there is no connection (time code 09:30).

The problem that the respondents had when confronted with the question on how they viewed the connection are related to how in the Western society a real friend is viewed to be. Some found it difficult to call it friendship, such as Susanne. Others, such as Albert already categorize themselves between different friendships, being real friends and just friends. Anmar would call it short friendships, emphasizing the limited time frame of it.

In addition the word intense was often used by respondents. I also encountered this intenseness when sharing living space with a person for a few days. The intenseness in the

relationship for me was the sharing of who I was in the time span of a few days. A lot of conversations and question would go back and forth between me and the host. For example Anmar was really keen in knowing who I was and how I thought about things. This sharing of information and feelings is what Houghton and Joinson (2010) defined as part of our social life and that we share less information with people we barely know. However I found that this was not always the case with Couchsurfing. Even though I did not know a host or surfer, depending on the person there is the potential to share a lot of information, feelings and thoughts. Thus creating an intense moment and feeling of trust.

Henderson & Gilden (2004) observed the same sharing of information and feelings with people developing a friendship online. They call this hyperpersonal communication, a higher level of self disclosure is often found in online conversations and friendships. Online participants sometimes find it easier to share online with an individual they have not met, then they would do in real life. With Couchsurfing the same applies, because people feel they can talk more freely when they know the person will leave again in a few days.

The freedom to pick a host, surfer or other Couchsurfer to meet based on similar interests is noted by Albert. "There is a lot of variation in the people of the Couchsurfing world. And you can choose from those people. When people send you a request, you can view their interest. For example, you just have to look at the movies or sport they like. Or you have travelled to the same countries. If you notice that interests align, then there is chance that you have something to say to one other. From this a friendship can develop" (time code 24:32). This freedom to pick based on similar interests seems like a sound basis for a friendship. People who have thing in common, also have things to talk about and base a friendship on. However this choosing in people is still limited by geographical location, age and gender.
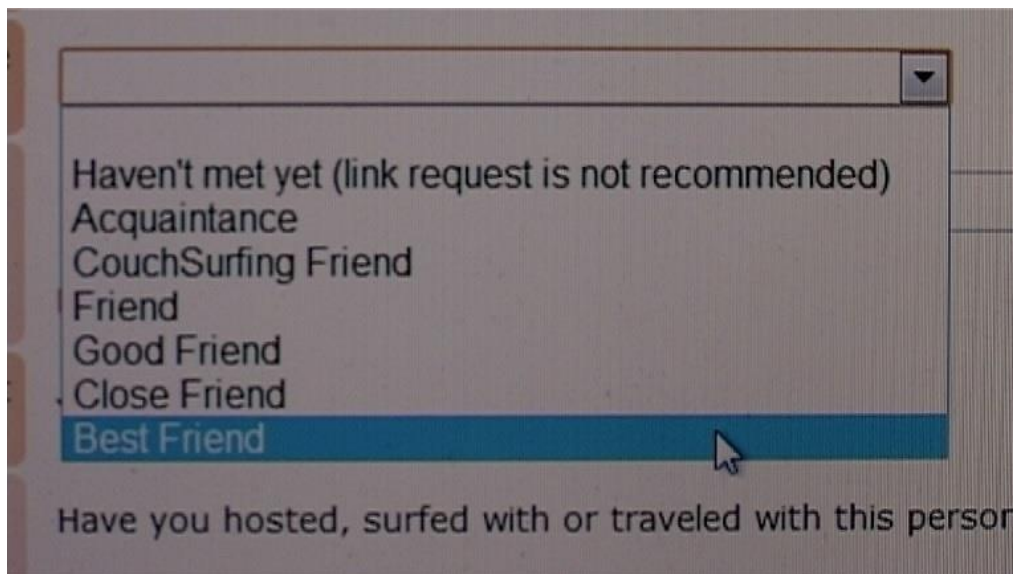
Figure 16: Screenshot of Albert's profile from the film Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community (time code 25:20)

After the Couchsurfer leaves the home of the host, members write a reference about the experience. With this reference, they can also grade the social connection. As Albert notes in the film "With Couchsurfing you can ask people to become friends, in different scales. Most people you encounter during Couchsurfing, 95 percent of them you will never meet again. Their life is far away and this is often very disappointing. With Facebook you can have a 1000 friends and only 1 or 2 real friends and maybe the same is true with Couchsurfing" (time code 24:00).

Categorization of friendship relations is something that people do in their daily lives as well. People have many different kinds of friendships ranging from weak to strong ties (Allen 1989). However this categorization of friendship in the Couchsurfing system is not as flexible as in real life situations. Calling a person a friend can also depend on the social situation (Allen 1989). Moreover categorization can also make for interesting real life conversations about how the social relationship should be defined. For example Anmar asked me how he should label me on the Couchsurfing website, a Couchsurfing friend or friend. He stated that because I lived relatively close by I could also be friend instead of a Couchsurfing friend. Thus the Couchsurfing community introduced a new term ´Couchsurfing friend´ as a categorical label to signify the unique character and quality of Couchsurfing friendships.

5. Conclusion

Couchsurfing is a social networking site that goes against the social norms "as people are welcoming strangers into the privacy of their homes: (Rosen, Lafontaine & Hendrickson 2011: 982). These strangers are invited into an 'intimate' home space, which can facilitate intimate and friendly encounters, exactly as Albert describes. The Couchsurfing organization has labeled these interaction "Couchsurfing friendships", to signify the social relationship that develops between a host and a guest. In this paper my respondents have described these interactions based on several characteristics, ranging from flexible, short, casual, without obligations, intense and superficial. Sometimes they would use the word friend, but more often they would call it a friendly encounter with a possibility of 'real' friendship.

The unique aspect of Couchsurfing relationship is that friendship between a host and guest can develop because the friendship interaction travels to several online and offline settings. A Couchsurfing encounter start from the online space. A couchrequest is send to potential host, making it the starting point to align expectations and interests between the host and guest. As Tang (2010) argues "online spaces make it easier to meet new friends "with similar others and to do so across time and space" (2010:629). Online, it is easier to find like minded individuals. This aligning is twofold. First, Couchsurfing is a niche community of global travelers. Being a member of the Couchsurfing community already tells others that they have something in common. As Susanne said: "With Couchsurfing I know we have something in common. For this reason I am less scared to trust people in the Couchsurfing community". Second, the information on the Couchsurfing profiles also makes is easier to find people you have shared interests with or have an interest in meeting with. Thus in the online space, the expectations of the Couchsurfing encounter can be mediated before the meeting. People can discuss how long the interaction last and what they want to do together when meeting offline. This makes that there is a certain contractual component with Couchsurfing friendships.

In the Couchsurfing community, the offline meeting of a host is important to create a feeling of intimacy. Offline friends can support friends to do joint activities and do practical things together (2010: 629). With the hosting and surfing, couchsurfers can share information, resources and their time with each other. However with Couchsurfing there is an additional factor that could lead to a more intimate connection. As Henderson & Gilden (2004) discusses there is less accountability online and this improves commitment to a social relationship by self disclosing information. With Couchsurfing the same characteristic can be found in the offline interaction. There is a limited time frame when meeting each other face to face to get

to know the other person. After this time is shared together the guest leaves again. This could increase the amount of self-disclosure of personal information and the sharing of feelings and emotions. In addition people feel less an obligation to continue the relationship if they don't want to.

After the Couchsurfing encounter is over, the social interaction shifts to the online space again. This online space can be the Couchsurfing platform where the connection is displayed on the profile or other means of staying in contact, such as Facebook. More often Couchsurfers will not meet again. However some do keep in contact when there is a potential to meet again and they felt a friendly connection.

Trust in an important aspect when building friendship relations in the Couchsurfing community. Without trust in the Couchsurfing platform and community people would not feel safe to surf or host a guest. For the community it is important to create a system in which Couchsurfing members can feel safe. My respondents valued the trust they can give and receive from the Couchsurfing community and its members. The giving and receiving of trust is also an important aspect of the guest-host relationship. The act of giving trust involves a taking a certain risk. As Tun (2010) notes Couchsurfers can "bracket out irreducible social vulnerability and uncertainty as if they were favorably resolved" (Möllering, 2006,115). In the eyes of this Couchsurfer, he is aware of the potential risks but he chooses to focus on himself as being able to handle it, and performs the act of trust"(2010:377).

The relationship between social networking sites and friendship has often been criticized for maintaining friendship relations that are based on weak ties with low commitment (Lewis & West 2009, Ellison & Boyd 2008). However as I have discussed, friendship relations in the Couchsurfing community can be valued in their own right. As Albert described his Couchsurfing friendship as strong and intimate, the relationship during hosting can be just that. This suggests that the reality of friendship in the digital age is more complex. As Beer stated in his study "we cannot think of friendship on social network sites as entirely different and disconnected from our actual friends and notions of friendship, particularly as young people grow up and are informed by the connections they make on social network sites" (Beer 2008: 520) Thus Couchsurfing friendship can be what Lewis & West describe as a category of 'friend': 'people you just don't see socially that much, but it doesn't necessarily mean you don't want to hear from them ever again"(Lewis & West 2009: 1218). Nonetheless this does not mean that social networking sites only promote weak ties with low commitment value. Weak ties can be intimate as well. The bond that is shared with Couchsurfing, getting to know one another in a limited amount of time, can be strong and

intimate in that moment of the offline meeting. It all depends on the motivations of the Couchsurfers involved and what they are looking for in an Couchsurfing relationship.

This research, however, is limited in its focus. I have conducted fieldwork in the Netherlands and with a small group of respondents. Further research could be done in different countries to reflect on how notions of friendship in different countries can influence the view on and expectations people have of Couchsurfing friendships. The Couchsurfing community is mostly localized in Western countries and with people who speak English. In my experiences when Couchsurfing in the Philippines, the hosts who open up their homes to guests are members who can participate because they are more orientated towards Western countries and have the means to host.

Image references

Figure 1: A compilation of two images, date 17-06-2014, retrieved from https:/ / www. Couchsurfing.org/n/ambassadorsrs.

Figure 2: Screenshot of Bart from the film Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community.

Figure 3: Screenshot of Anmar from the film Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community.

Figure 4: Screenshot of Albert from the film Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community.

Figure 5: Screenshot of Susanne from the film Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community.

Figure 6: Dauntless Jaunter (2012) *All about Couchsurfing: the complete guide*, date 10-07-2014, retrieved from http://www.dauntlessjaunter.com/travel-tips-advice-how-tos/couchsurfing-complete-guide/5/

Figure 7: Kominek, M. (2012a) Couchsurfing revolt, date 20-06-2014, retrieved from http://www.thecrazyhistoryofhistory.com/2012/09/Couchsurfers-revolt.html.

Figure 8: Print screen of my couch request conversation with Bart.

Figure 9: Kominek, M. (2012a) 'What is Couchsurfing by the way' date 15-06-2014, retrieved from http://www.thecrazyhistoryofhistory.com/2012/04/what-is-Couchsurfing-by-way.html.

Figure 10: Kominek, M. (2012b) 'What is Couchsurfing by the way' date 15-06-2014, retrieved from http://www.thecrazyhistoryofhistory.com/2012/04/what-is-Couchsurfing-by-way.html.

Figure 11: Print screen of my Couchsurfing profile template before filling it in.

Figure 12: Print screen after I have filled in my information on my Couchsurfing profile template.

Figure 13: Print screen of the photo's I uploaded on my Couchsurfing profile.

Figure 14: Screenshot of Anmar's profile from the film Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community (time 16:01)

Figure 15: Screenshot of Albert's profile from the film Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community (time code 27:01)

Figure 16: Screenshot of Albert's profile from the film Flexible friendship in the Couchsurfing community (time code 25:20).

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Appendix 1 Couchsurfing tips

Tips for Couchsurfing

There is no 'right' way to Couchsurf: everyone has their own standards for what makes an inspiring experience. However, there are some tips and tricks that can help you on your way. And remember: when you enter a situation with an open mind, a flexible attitude, and a sense of humor, you're already well on your way to a good experience.

Before You Arrive

CouchSearch with care. Choose your host carefully by **reading her profile** thoroughly. When you've chosen, be sure to write a personalized and thought-out **Couch Request**

Discuss your plans. Some hosts want to spend a lot of time with their Couchsurfers; others are short on free time. Same for Couchsurfers. The first step to a good time is making sure your expectations match your host's.

Make plans. Both you and your host should be clear on when you're arriving and where you'll meet. Be sure to carry your host's phone number in case of any confusion!

Always have a back up plan. Don't forget your guidebook! If something comes up last minute and your host's plans change, be ready to find a hostel.

Come prepared. Your host may offer you food during your stay, but always be ready to wing it. Bring groceries or enough cash to eat out. (If you do get treated to a meal, doing a little washing up or cooking the next night are nice ways to say thank you.)

Discuss your schedule. Agree on your arrival and departure date ahead of time to avoid any miscommunication. If for any reason your plans change and you need to reschedule or cancel your stay, always give your host as much notice as possible.

During Your Stay

Learn your host's guidelines. When you arrive, make sure you find out how your host's home runs. How and when can you come and go from the home? Is it ok for you to use the kitchen, the computer, or the phone? Is water or electricity particularly expensive in this city, and if so, what should you do to minimize your impact?

When in doubt, ask. If something comes up that you haven't already discussed with your host, just ask. Permission to use the computer one time may not be permission to use it whenever you'd like, so make sure you're communicating clearly with your host throughout your stay.

Make your schedule compatible with your host's. If your host is eager to spend time with you and show you around, it's a nice gesture to make time in your schedule for him. If he's busy and doesn't have much time to interact, find things to do on your own. Also, always talk to your host about when you'll be home.

Follow your host's lead. Observe how your host behaves in her home and try to behave similarly. If she's a very neat person, be extra careful to keep yourself and your belongings tidy. If she's sleeping and you're awake, try not to disturb her.

Leave things in better condition than you found them. If your host lends you something of his, be respectful of his possessions and his generosity.

Never invite guests to your host's home. You should never bring unexpected people back to your host's place - particularly not that cute girl from the bar. Leave the party at the party, sailor.

Don't be shy about showing appreciation. Most Couchsurfers like to do something nice when they have a good experience with their host. You can wash the dishes, fix her bicycle, cook a meal from your home country, or make an art project - whatever it is, your host will appreciate the thought even more than the gesture!

Stick to your planned schedule. Be very wary of extending your stay. If you really like your host and would like to stick around longer, ask early and be specific about how long you'd like to extend.

After Your Stay

Leave on a good note. When it's time to hit the road, make sure that you leave your host's things in better condition than you found them. If you borrowed anything, double check that you've returned it. If your host isn't at home when you leave, make sure that you know how to secure the door correctly.

How to thank your host. If your host treated you well, be sure to leave her a positive reference so that other Couchsurfers can hear about it! If you had a really good connection with your host, a postcard from your next destination is always a nice way to say thanks.

Community Guidelines

To be a Couchsurfing member, you must agree to follow these simple guidelines to help make this community a better place for us all:

1. Do Respect Others
Couchsurfing is a meeting place for people of different cultures, lifestyles and ideals. By joining our community, you promise to communicate with respect and consideration, even if you encounter someone you disagree with.

2. Do Make Informed Decisions
Our trust network is self-moderating. Always look out for your own safety by reading profiles carefully, and help others make good decisions by leaving references after hosting or surfing.

3. Don't Spam
We value human interaction. Please don't create copy-and-paste messages, Couchrequests, group posts or event listings. Don't use Couchsurfing to promote a business or product.

4. Don't Go Looking for a Date
Our members join Couchsurfing to create friendships. Don't contact other members for dating – we will consider this harassment.

5. Don't Charge for Your Couch
Our community offers free exchange of hospitality. Asking for money or labor in exchange for your couch is not allowed.

6. Don't Let Anyone Under 18 Use the Website
Many of our members host or surf with their families, children included. However, only adults may create profiles and choose who to meet.

7. Don't Create More than One Profile
The profile that you are about to create is the only one that you may have. Our trust network needs everyone to stand by their reputation. And profiles can be for real people only – please no joke profiles, pet profiles, etc.

8. Surfing Is a Privilege, Not a Right
As a surfer, recognize that you are asking to stay in someone's home. No one is ever obligated to accept your request. Couch availability is never guaranteed. As a host, never feel pressured to accept a request, but do make an effort to respond to surfers even if you can't host them.

Couchsurfing's Be Considerate and Respectful Policy
The "Be Considerate and Respectful" policy detailed below is one part of several policies that all members must abide by when they use Couchsurfing, including the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy.

These policies can be updated at any time, at the discretion of Couchsurfing. To read Couchsurfing's member policies, please visit Couchsurfing Guidelines and Couchsurfing Terms of Use.