

CouchSurfing: Perspectives of Surfers and Hosts

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1. Introduction

The idea of CouchSurfing is established by Casey Fenton who hacks into the university system in Iceland. He wanted to find that if any students were willing to provide a stranger a place to stay. Members on CouchSuring include surfers and hosts. The hosts not only give surfers a place to stay but also some useful suggestions to visit local places. Instead of giving money to hosts, surfers bring something from their countries as a return. They exchange culture differences and travel experience, etc. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out what motivates and interests travelers to become a member of CouchSurfing.

2. Review of Literature

Thanks to technology, the worldwide Internet provides an international village for us. Through the Net, food, clothing, accommodation, transportation, education, entertainment, can all be arranged. CouchSurfing is a social webpage which is launched base on the Internet. When planning for a trip on your own, CouchSurfing provides a whole new page for traveling by staying with locals instead of in hotels.

The first section is about *informal economy* of hospitality and how *moral economy* works. The second point provides general information about CouchSurfing, including the beginning and the concept of it. The third points are some CouchSurfing members' opinions. What's more, the cost of traveling can be lower when you travel through CouchSurfing. This is a website which brings the idea of meeting different

people in an easy way.

2.1 *Informal Economy of Hospitality*

Jennie Germann Molz is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts, USA. In her book *Travel Connections*, she mentions about how technology influences the way people travel. Due to widespread of the Internet, now travelers have more options to choose when they travel. In addition to choosing from hostels or hotels, there is another new choice, to stay in a local's couch. This kind of travel style gets more and more popular because CouchSurfing is that everything costs free. The hosts do not expect surfers to pay; on the contrary, they will be happy if they can get something special from the surfers' country. Molz points out that this is an *informal economy* of hospitality. People want to have something else rather than money, for example, friendship, willingness, kindness, or unselfishness.

In the book, *moral economy* is mentioned and compared with *market economy*. Different from cold, indirect market economy, moral economy create a warm, tender, and human connection. Moral economy is about exchange, no matter about your travel experiences, your cultures, or your professions. One thing that is special about moral economy is that it does not need to return the favor immediately. Surfers can change to become hosts when they are back to their countries in order to keep this community going. According to Molz (2012), "By framing hospitality as an equitable

exchange of resources and generosity, CouchSurfing creates an environment in which members must trust each other to not take too much or give too little.” This interaction installs the idea of being considerate among members into CouchSurfing.

2.2 Definition of CouchSufing

According to Steere (2007), he points out CouchSurfing is an online community that provides the same privilege for surfers and hosts. He goes on to say about by whom and when CouchSurfing is launched. In 2004, Casey Fenton, an American traveler and a computer programmer, built this website to offer budget travelers a massive way to search a couch instead of a hotel or a hostel. Steere states about the successful growth of CouchSurfing. About three years, there are 340,000 members all over the world, in more than 32,000 cities and towns in 233 countries. Steere also mentions about CouchSurfing is not only about free accommodation but also about culture exchange differences. He points out that some people have safety concerns when traveling through CouchSurfing. This website works by references. The circle of trust is built by members’ recommendations and guarantees. As Ward observes, the average age of member on CouchSurfing is twenty-five. More than forty-four percent of the members are between the ages of eighteen to twenty-four. The most popular continent for CouchSurfing is Europe and the second active one is North America. There are divans you can found in two hundred thirteen countries even in Saudi Arabia. Casey Fenton launches CouchSurfing after he escaped to Iceland for holidays.

Ward states “He hacks into the university system to e-mail hundreds of students indicating that he wants to experience the real Iceland.” The enthusiastic responses surprise him. Then, he starts to work on the website. Now to keep on updating CouchSurfing has become Fenton’s full time job. Ward states that CouchSurfing is a brain trust behind the screen, which is powered by Fenton and volunteers. It takes few months to settle down when Fenton has tried to get all coworkers he needs. Fenton’s staff members focus on safety issue, for example, a warning message sent to members about a recent credit card theft. Safety is still the most important thing that people care about. The circle of trust among members on CouchSurfing keeps on rolling by vouching for each other.

2.3 Opinion of CouchSurfing

When it comes to a tourist season, usually it causes a lot of money for traveling. It is difficult for people to have a high quality trip. Instead of staying in five stars hotels, people find cheaper hostels. However, this article in Irish Time provides CouchSurfing as another choice to stay in local areas. CouchSurfing is a website where we can find a sofa to stay over the world. Usually people have doubts to stay with an absolutely stranger while traveling, but the article states that CouchSurfing is launched based on trust and respect.

Leroy Watson, 29 years old, an interviewer by Steere, is one of the members on

CouchSurfing. Watson says the biggest benefit through CouchSurfing is his human experiences gains. He thinks CouchSurfing is a global community where like-minded people gather together. He has experiences CouchSurfing more than five countries. He realizes that people are just interested in meeting people from all different countries even though they live in the middle of nowhere. Watson thinks CouchSurfing is as exciting as roller coaster, and his couch-surfing experiences is his best period while he is traveling.

Watson provides one of his surfing experiences while he is in Morocco. He has a chance to go to the mountains at a tiny village which he never thinks about. Jim Goldblum and Chris Vourlias are interviewers of Terry Ward, who provide their experiences in the article. Goldblum travels around Europe while studying in Spain. "It gets a little monotonous, honestly", said Goldblum. He decides to start a new way to travel in the next year. He uses CouchSurfing to find accommodations instead of staying at hostels: "It just completely changed things." He thinks that CouchSurfing not only stretches budgets but also opens different pages of traveling. Goldblum has a chance to stay in a gracious seaside apartment in Portugal or to have a personal tour guide who explains everything and takes him to everywhere in Poland. Vourlias would no doubt agree with what Goldblum says. He states that staying with a host allows you to experience a real local life.

Gillian Hamill has interviews with some members of CouchSurfing. Trish Loughman, a CouchSurfing member, has been a host for more than ten years. She thinks that hosting male surfers is easier. For example, even though she has short hair, she is bothered by many of her female surfers who ask for hair straighteners. Loughman mentions that hosts can give surfers some advices, for example, which sites is better to visit, how to get there, or what tourist traps which they should be aware of. Keith McGee, an ambassador from CouchSurfing, points out that giving your house keys to a surfer that is the best proof of the spirit of CouchSurfing. According to McGee's experience, he says that usually it takes just a while to know that if you are going to like the person or not. At the end, McGee considers that CouchSurfing is the website which shows the kindness of strangers and a website which brings the idea of meeting different people in an easy way.

Summary

This review of literature consists of three sections. First, due to the convenience of technology, the traveling accommodation now has more options to choose. Moral economy is mentioned and being compared with market economy. People who travel with CouchSurfing create a human connection that is warm and tender moral economy. The second part is about how this website is launched and how it works. Within three years, there are more than 340,000 members all over the world. In this

third section, some opinions are provided to discuss how some members of CouchSurfing describe their experiences. It is usually expensive to travel during the tourist season, but CouchSurfing is a website where we can have choices to stay in local areas for free.

In order to know more about people's attitude toward CouchSurfing, below are the research questions:

1. Why do CouchSurfing members want to become hosts or surfers?
2. What are CouchSurfing members' experiences?

3. Research Methods

3.1 Participants

There were four participants. Two of them were surfers and the others are hosts. All of the interviews took place on Skype. I contacted them through Facebook and CouchSurfing website. The interview lasted around twenty minutes to thirty minutes per person.

The first interviewee was a surfer. I travelled with her in Europe for one month. She had been a surfer for about two years and surfed for sixteen times. The participant who was my host in London did two interviews with me; One as a surfer, the other one as a host. She hosted for about one hundred times and surfed for ten times. The last participant was a Canadian. I met him on CouchSurfing, he has about fifty times

hosting experiences in Taiwan.

3.2 Research Design and Procedures

I designed my interview questions into two categories. One was the questions for surfers, and the other one was for hosts. Each parts included thirteen to fifteen questions. Depends on the interviewees, questions would be more or fewer. The two parts both started with the background information about the interviewees without telling their real names. Then the questions were about what their first impression with CouchSurfing. Following were some questions about their hosting and surfing experiences. Each interview would end up with using a word or sentences to describe their experiences on CouchSurfing.

The two hosts I interviewed both have more than fifty times hosting experiences on CouchSurfing. One was a guy from Canada who now lived in Taiwan, and the other one was a Chinese student who was studying in Germany. Compared to the female Chinese student, the male interviewee answered fewer questions. They had more than fifty times hosting experiences. However, when answering to the question whether or not they had bad experiences, surprisingly both of them got the answer “No.” The Chinese student even used her hosting experiences as her graduate collection project for her bachelor degree.

As for the surfers, one was my host when I was travelling in London. She also

did the interview with me as a host. Although she had more experiences as being a host, she still had about ten times surfing experiences. The other surfer interviewee was my school sister who travelled with me in Europe. She had surfing experiences all over Europe when she was an exchange student in Germany for half a year. She used CouchSurfing not only to cut down the cost of accommodation but also to make friends with people all over the world.

4. Findings

Two interviewees had more than fifty times hosting experiences. The male host had hosted for about fifty times, and the female student had one hundred times hosting experiences. Both of them got no negative references from their guests. The man hosted people in many different places including Vietnam, Turkey, Belgium, China, and New Zealand. As the female student, most of her host experiences occurred in London.

What motivated the interviewees to become hosts was to help others. The female student was an exchange student in Germany three years ago and enjoyed being appreciated. When she had hosted more people, she enjoyed the relationship and connection between strangers. She thought that being a host made her feel easier to trust strangers. The warmth between strangers based on trust and sharing was shown on CouchSurfing. She mentioned from her surfers' personalities or the life

experiences they had also broaden her view. The Canadian guy felt it was nice to offer someone a place for a night and he could have a chance to know some traveling's benefits without leaving home.

The feelings when hosts were waiting for their first surfers were anxious and weird. The first guest of the female host did not show up at the end, so while she was expecting for her arrival, the host worried a lot about her safety. The Canadian guy felt strange when waiting for his first surfer, but he stated that the weird feeling quickly disappear after he became good friends with his surfer.

Both hosts had a negative answer for having any bad experiences. The female host mentioned she had some stuffs missing, but it had no effect for her to continue hosting. She thought it was more about how much she could entrust to a stranger when she was a host. The male host did not have bad experiences, either. However, they both said that they hosted people who were not on the same page. The male host thought sometimes it was okay that you just could not get along well with someone naturally. The female host said she would not consider those people as her life-long friends, who came and left. In her world, the world was small but also big.

Different surfers had different point of views as being a surfer, but the same thing was they liked to make friends. One had sixteen surfing experiences, and the other one had ten times. One considered CouchSurfing as the best way to travel without

paying for accommodation fee, but she usually brought some gifts as exchange. The other one would want to do things with hosts; therefore, it did not really cost less than staying in hostels. She would not say it was free; it was more like how much she can give to people and how much she was able to take.

The main concern for the surfers when they were finding a host was safety and trust. Both of them chose those hosts who put a profile photo on the website and with no negative references. My two surfer interviewees were female, so they chose female hosts as a priority. However, there were much more guys than girls on CouchSurfing. When they failed to find female hosts, they tried with male hosts, and the results all came out not bad. The second surfer stated although the guest and the host were in opposite positions, they were connected completely. How trust worthy the surfer was would also affect the host. She thought CouchSurfing was a website stands for informal economy.

The relationship between surfers and hosts became at least friends on Facebook. The female host has about ten to fifteen guests became really close friends that they talked once for every two months. The rest of surfers they were friends on Facebook. As the surfers, they met their hosts not only once. The first surfer had her host visited her again in Taiwan. The second surfers arranged second or third meet-up with more than three of her hosts.

Bad host or surfer would affect a stay. The male host mentioned if he found the surfers were considerate and nice to get along with, there was no problem for him to extend their stay. The first surfer had a bad experience that she met a host which lived in a dirty and messy apartment. That host also hosted other surfers, so the place was kind of crowded. Originally, she planned to stay in Berlin for five days four nights, because of this host, she cut down her trip to three days two nights.

All the interviewees were not only hosts but also surfers. Both of my hosts had the chance to be surfers as well. The female host had ten experiences as a surfer. She stated that compared as being a surfer, she preferred to be a host. Due to the reason that when she was a host, she stayed in her safe zone. Therefore, she felt more secure. The male host surfed about twenty five times. He felt an immense gratitude to many of his hosts for their help and generosity. At the same time, he liked to connect with travelers and showed them a part of the city where they would never see. As the surfer, she liked to be a surfer more than a host. She admitted that being a host can also make friends. She loved traveling, so she preferred to experiences the local life in different countries and get to know more about their lifestyles.

The benefit for being a member on CouchSurfing was to make friends without any boundary. The female host said in CouchSurfing world, they met people in short period. In this way, she could see the best part of someone and learning from them in

a good way. CouchSurfing somehow kept her life positive and it was a platform or a media to make the world or the society better and more trustful. The male host described it as a way for him to meet travelers and hosts around the world. He pointed out CouchSurfing can help him do both meet locals and eat new food. From surfers' side, they both agreed that CouchSurfing was a good way to save money. One surfer said she can not only learn language while staying with hosts but also broaden her conception of the world.

5. Discussion

The study found that the reasons why members among CouchSurfing become hosts or surfers were the chances to meet new friends from different countries and to offer travelers some help. My interviewees include two hosts and two surfers, all of them have some points in common. First, they like to share and make friends. No matter a host or a surfer, they enjoy experiencing a different way of traveling. Second, their positions on CouchSurfing are both hosts and surfers. This phenomenon referred to the informal economy of hospitality, interpreting as people who want something else rather than money. In the book, *Travel Connections*, moral economy is mentioned. The hosts expect to get some small gifts as an exchange of the stay. Therefore, the members on CouchSurfing would mostly be friendly and willing to share.

The study showed that a safety problem is the main concern for surfers. Both the

surfer interviewees mentioned that they would choose their hosts with profile photos. Due to the reason they were female surfers, they tended to find hosts with the same sex with them at first. This attitude is indicated in Steere's article. He points out people have safety concern while choosing to stay at CouchSurfing, and it is a brain trust behind the screen. That is why this website works with references. When surfers search for hosts, they check the references of hosts to see how they are rated by their previous guests. Hence, trust and safety could be the major factors for the surfers while they are looking for hosts.

They study revealed that the biggest benefit for the members of CouchSurfing is to gain human experiences. These hosts both referred to their interests while exchanging travel experiences with their guests. The female host even felt CouchSurfing can help the world to become a better place. The surfer enjoyed not only having culture shocks but also having cross cultural conversation with the hosts. This result shares the same point which is commented in Steere's article. His interviewee, Leroy Watson, said CouchSurfing provided a community where like-minded people can gather together. The profit of CouchSurfing is having the chance to share everyone's life experiences. Thus, to broaden their horizon can be a reason for why they become one of the members of CouchSurfing.

6. Conclusion

My aim in this paper is to investigate the opinions of CouchSurfing members, including hosts and surfers. In order to know what motivated the members to become hosts or surfers, interviews are used in the research. The widespread of the Internet allows travelers to have more options to choose from where and who to stay with when they travel. CouchSurfing is an online community that provides the same privilege for surfers and hosts. Members on CouchSurfing are mostly hospitable, they welcome strangers to stay in their houses without being charged, one aspect of the moral economy. Different from market economy, moral economy is about exchanging, no matter what it is about. People want to have something else rather than money. This concept is an informal economy of hospitality which appears after CouchSurfing is launched.

On the whole, this study demonstrates that the main purpose for the members on CouchSurfing is to meet new friends from all over the world. From the hosts' point of view, they have a chance to travel the world without going out from their homes. From the surfers' side, they are able to stay with local people while they experience a different culture in foreign countries. Although safety problem is the first issue for the surfers, this website runs with references given by one another. Surfers can check for hosts' references to have a first thought about them. These facts represent that CouchSurfing is a platform offered for people who like to share and willing to give

travelers a hand. In the book, *Travel Connections*, Molz (2012) mentions CouchSurfing is a webpage that provides an environment for people who trust each other to share their homes, lives, and their thoughts with people you barely know beforehand.

It should be noted that this study has been primarily concerned with female members on CouchSurfing. On the website, there are more male members than female ones; however, I only have one interview with a male host. The average ages of using CouchSurfing is twenty-eight years old. Two of my interviewees are younger, and one of them is older than the average age. There are about seven million members on CouchSurfing, but I only did four interviews. The results may not be applied to different surfers and hosts.

7. References

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