

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES' INFLUENCE ON TRAVELERS' AUTHENTIC
EXPERIENCE

A CASE STUDY OF COUCH SURFING

By

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To my first couch surfer, best friend, true love and now husband Ray

Without whom this dissertation would have been completed one year earlier

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ABSTRACT

This study explored travelers' experiences in the era of network hospitality 2.0 using CouchSurfing.org as a case study. The following research questions guided this study: 1) what experience does CouchSurfing create for travelers before, during and after their travel? 2) how does couch surfers' experience relate to authenticity in context of network hospitality 2.0? data was collected through semi-structured interviews, online surveys, and textual analysis of couch surfers' online comments about their experience. Data analysis produced three independent manuscripts that examine couch surfers' experiences from various perspectives. The first manuscript used the Rasch Model to examine the couch surfers' perceptions of online factors that contribute to their decision-making in search for a host before traveling offline. The second manuscript seeks deeper understanding of couch surfers' authentic using semi-structured interviews. The last manuscript explores authenticity that is manifested in couch surfers' own expressions of their experience in online reviews. Quantitative data analysis found that the factors couch surfers perceive most important are: negative references, positive references, couch availability, personal description and pictures. Qualitative data indicated that network hospitality 2.0 provides opportunities for couch surfers to experience authenticity. However, when applying qualitative data to existential authenticity, some types of existential authenticity are more frequently seen in the data than others.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

THE INTIMATE STRANGER ON YOUR COUCH

It is 5 p.m. in Rome, I'm standing outside a modern residence building, the type you enter either using a key or by being admitted by someone from the inside. My host gave me this address in previous emails we exchanged. We arranged my stay in his apartment through the CouchSurfing website two weeks ago. By 5:20 p.m. I am getting nervous because of the situation: it is getting dark. I do not own a local cell phone. I have never met my host in person before. All I have to cling to right now is his address and phone number. I ask myself "what should I do if he bails on me?" Luckily, my broken Italian helps me borrow a cell phone from a passing young woman who appears to be in her late twenties. I tell her that I need to call my "friend" so that he can let me in the building, without mentioning the fact that I have never met my "friend" before.

Two minutes later, a tall, middle-aged Italian man comes downstairs. We immediately recognize each other from our CouchSurfing profile pictures. "Xiao?" "Marcello?" We say simultaneously. We smile and shake hands in greeting and go upstairs to his apartment. Marcello gives me a small tour of his two floor apartment. He shows me my "bedroom," which is his office with a convertible couch. He gives me the password for his wifi and grabs some clean sheets and towels for me. "I need to go upstairs to do my one-hour daily workout, but there's beer in the fridge, make yourself at home, I'll talk to you in a bit." Marcello says apologetically and goes off for his workout. I open the fridge, and can't help grinning at a full shelf of Tsingtao beer, the only beer that is distributed outside my home country China. I take a beer outside and sit down on the balcony enjoying the cool evening breeze as the cold beer eases away the knot in my stomach. About one hour later, Marcello comes down, cleaned up and starts making

pasta for dinner. In both of our CouchSurfing profiles, we share a lot of interests in common, such as cooking, drinking beer, reading and traveling. With beer in hand, I stand in the kitchen talking with him about these interests we share, places we have been, couch surfing experiences we had, etc. Our lively conversation carries over to dinner table and all the way to the end of the evening. Before we call it a night, Marcello shows me his garage where he stores things, including the bike he is loaning me for the next couple of days. He also gives me the keys to the front gate, his apartment and garage.

The next morning, I get up to find Marcello already gone to work, but leaving me a note, a map, and a cell phone on the dining table: "I'm spending the night at my girlfriend's tonight, but we'll be back tomorrow night around 7 p.m. I circled some places you might be interested in on the map, if you need anything, call me with this cell phone." I smile at his consideration and start my exploration of Rome on the loaner bike.

In the following two days, I manage to meet with some other local couch surfers for a lunch and a mid-night museum tour through communications on CouchSurfing. Exploring the city on a bike is a great experience. Even better, I had locals who are also couch surfers take me around and show me their view of Rome. There was an annual free tour of museums in Rome where a group of both local and international couch surfers meet up and visit several different museums. We look for local restaurants serving real Italian food instead of the pricy fake tourist food. We talk and laugh, enjoying each other's stories, just like friends, even though we didn't know each other the day before. I would not know any of these people or experience Rome the locals' way, if not for these local couch surfers.

The night before I leave, I go shopping for some ingredients to make Chinese curry chicken. Marcello and his girlfriend come home with a bottle of wine shortly after. Again, we share our love of food and recipes, and enjoy another evening of laugh and interesting conversations. I leave the next morning before they wake up because of my train schedule. I put everything back to place, leave a thank you note, close the door behind me and move on to my next host's place.

After reading my story some people may think both Marcello and me are crazy. Loads of questions may come to your mind. For Marcello, how dare he let a stranger into his house after only reading an online profile and exchange of a few emails? How could he leave his entire house to a stranger he met just a few hours ago? What if she is a thief? For me, how dare I staying at a strange man's house without knowing him in person? What if he is a serial killer or a rapist? Even if he is not a criminal, how do I know whether he is going to show up when I arrive? Even if he shows up as a normal person, what if we cannot get along? What happened to the do-not-talk-to-stranger rule that parents preach to their children?

Even if everything works out, what experience am I expecting from staying in his apartment compared to staying in a hostel or hotel? Intrigued by this question, I set out on a quest for couch surfers' experience utilizing the middle ground between the tourism studies in authenticity and social network research in this study. Tourism research in authenticity will help explain the motivations of couch surfers as travelers in general. Social network studies will assist in clarifying how technological progress assists the changes of the way people travel and their traveling experiences. Particularly, I will take

the theoretical perspectives of MacCannell' authenticity and Wang's (1999) existential authenticity.

MacCannell (1973, 1976) introduced the concept of authenticity in the sociological study of tourism. He summarized authenticity as "the genuine, worthwhile and spontaneous experience of travel" (Pearch & Moscardo, 1986). MacCannell explained that tourists' motivation is to seek this genuine experience of other places and other people to escape from their daily life. However, the tourism industry by nature barricades the pursuit of authenticity. Goffman (1959) polarized social settings into front stage and back stage. According to Goffman, people tend to create an image for others in front stage, when they let down their guard at back stage where members of the audience are typically out of bounds (Goffman, 1959). Similarly, in the front stage of tourism, festivals, cuisine, dress, rituals, cultural events and other toured objects are set up for tourists. In the back stage, the tourism industry-related people retreat back to their normal life without having to perform certain "reality" to the tourists. As a result, tourists are not getting the authentic experience they expected.

Dann (2002) argues that MacCannell's authenticity theory and a large quantity of authenticity studies were conducted for mass tourism before the popularity of the personal computer, internet, blogs, and mobile phones. Thus, the question remains whether authenticity theory can be applied to individualized travel in a world where internet and mobile devices are prevalent in daily life. More recently, Molz (2011) has explained the significance of studying travelers' authentic experiences in the current age of digital communication, online social networking and alternative traveling. Taking both Dann and Molz into consideration, this study explored couch surfers experience through

the theoretical lens of authenticity. More detailed explanation about authenticity will be presented in Chapter three: the pursuit of authenticity in the era of network hospitality 2.0.

In addition to authenticity theory in tourism, researchers have also examined CouchSurfing from the perspective of network hospitality. Network hospitality is a term first introduced by Molz (2011) to address the ways individuals “imagine and perform hospitality in a mobile, mediated and networked society” (p. 216). For example, instead of staying in a hostel or hotel, I stayed with a stranger, Marcello, through the networking hospitality website CouchSurfing. Molz also believes network hospitality theory will help researchers reflect a broad view of togetherness and strangeness, risk and trust, reciprocity and exchange in a mobile and networked world. Network hospitality is examined and explained in depth in the later parts of this introduction.

In sum, the purpose of this study is to explore travelers’ experience through the social lenses of authenticity and network hospitality. In particular, the study explored couch surfers’ experience before, during and after their travel. The following section briefly introduces the research background, research settings, brief literature review, research questions, research methodology, and the arrangement of this dissertation.

Network Hospitality

A Brief History: Network Hospitality 1.0

Couch surfing is a concept referring to the activity of moving from a friend’s or relative’s home to another for a few days each time for spare sleeping space, may it be a couch, a guest room or the floor. This concept later was captured by Bob Lutweiler who established SERVAS International as the first hospitality exchange network in 1949.

Lutweiler built SERVAS International to be an international, non-governmental, non-profit organization that would promote understanding, tolerance and world peace through individual interactions at a post-war era (SERVAS International, 2013). A few hundred members exchange their personal description and contact information through a seasonally-published journal. For many years, the SERVAS International members relied on phone calls and traditional letters to communicate and to arrange staying with each other while traveling. Molz (2011) first introduced the term network hospitality to describe hospitality exchange organizations as SERVAS.

After SERVAS International, other pioneers set up several hospitality exchange organizations. For example, John Wilcock founded Traveler's Directory in 1965 (Kirk, 1998); Wayne Smith started the Friendship Force International (FFI, 2013). Former President Jimmy Carter promoted FFI in the public in 1977. These first-generation hospitality exchange organizations share the vision of promoting cultural exchanges and world peace through person-to-person interactions (Molz, 2011). They also worked in a similar manner: posting member information in periodicals and communicating through landline phones and traditional letters.

In the late 1990s, personal computers and the Internet became popular in more people's lives. More travelers found it easier to exchange messages through Internet than sending a written letter. As a result, some network hospitality 1.0 organizations adopted the Internet into their service, some faded out of people's sight, and some made their international debut. For instance, SERVAS and FFI switched from the original model to the more sophisticated online network hospitality services (Molz, 2011). The original Traveler's Directory stopped publishing in the mid-1990s. In Between 1997 and 2000,

Veit Kühne built the first widely used Internet-based hospitality exchange service Hospitality Club (The Hospitality Club, 2013). Several other online hospitality network organizations appeared in the same decade, such as Global Freeloaders, Hospitality Exchange, and CouchSurfing (Molz, 2011). Similar to the network hospitality 1.0, these online hospitality networks continue promoting cultural exchange and global understanding across nations, and spread tolerance and friendship through travel, free hospitality and face-to-face interactions. For this reason, the study henceforth refers to these online network hospitality exchange organizations as network hospitality 2.0.

CouchSurfing: Network Hospitality 2.0

Both generations of network hospitality (1.0 and 2.0) aim to promote cultural exchange, global understanding across nations, and spread tolerance and friendship through travel, free hospitality and face-to-face interactions. The major difference is that network hospitality 2.0 provides more complicated services through an online platform, while network hospitality 1.0 relied on traditional methods, such as a yellow-page-like booklet circulated among members. Benefiting from personal computers and the Internet, network hospitality 2.0 had several advantages: more prompt communication, more sophisticated systems of expressing oneself, faster ways of getting to know other members, and more convenient ways of arranging hospitality online. For example, today members can update their profile anytime online instead of waiting for the seasonal member information in a paper version. In network hospitality 1.0, members waited for a “snail mail” for days and weeks. Now they can exchange emails or instant messages within hours, minutes, even seconds. The above examples are only a glimpse of the advantages of hospitality network 2.0. In the following section, the research examines

CouchSurfing as an example to understand how network hospitality 2.0 functions. The various informational components of the CouchSurfing website are examined in detail (personal demographics, couch, personal descriptions, security and network), compared to network hospitality 1.0, and related to other social networking sites. As a result, the reasons for network hospitality 2.0's popularity over 1.0 among travelers are also discussed.

CouchSurfing

CouchSurfing is a “global network of travelers, adventure seekers and lifelong learners” who value trust in human nature and are enthusiastic about sharing cultures, hospitality and authentic experiences both for travelers and hosts (CouchSurfing, 2012). This site is an online platform primarily for couch surfers to find a free place to stay for a few days while traveling, to meet local people, and to exchange information and culture (Rosen, Lafontaine, & Hendrickson, 2011). According to Kuss and Griffiths (2011), SNSs is the “virtual communities where users can create individual public profiles, interact with real-life friends, and meet other people based on shared interests” (p. 3529). According to this definition, network hospitality 2.0 is essentially a type of social networking sites. In other words, CouchSurfing is an example of network hospitality 2.0 as well as an activity-centered SNS and that serves as a platform for hospitality, information, and culture exchanging among travelers around the world.

CouchSurfing, when spelled together with CS capitalized, is both an online SNSs that offers a platform for travelers to find a place to stay and a brand of online hospitality exchange network organization. When couch surfing is spelled separately, it refers to the

practice of hospitality exchanging. Members of CouchSurfing website are referred to as couch surfers in practice and in this study.

General Information

General Information segment on the CouchSurfing website includes a couch surfer's user name, couch availability, last login time and location, registration date, age, gender, occupation, education and ethnicity. This section gives viewers a brief view of a couch surfer's demographics. Additional to the informational function, this segment also serves as filters to narrow down couch searches. In network hospitality 1.0 era, people did not have such luxury to filter information with computer. However, there were not as many users at the time either. Reading through a few hundred people's information is achievable. In comparison, it is almost impossible to read all the profiles on CouchSurfing with its millions of users. Even in one city, it would be too time consuming to filter profiles by reading them one by one. For example, if a couch surfer searches for a host in New York, approximately 49,000 hosts will appear in the search result. With the assistance of computerized filters, couch surfers can narrow it down to a manageable number in search of someone they want to stay with. Figure 1 illustrates the current available filters on a couch search.

Find:

- Locals
- Travelers** to meet
- Hosts** to stay with
With space for

Or search by:

-

Filter by:Age, Gender or Keyword Age: to

- Male
- Female
- Several people

Your Network

- My Friends
- Friends of my Friends
- In my groups

Safety Features

- Has Photo
- Verified
- Vouched

Advanced Options Language: Last login: **Smoking & Pets** ▼

Smoking

- Smoking allowed
- Host is non smoker

Pets

- Pets allowed
- Host has no pets
- Suitable for kids
- Wheelchair Accessible
- Ambassador

Figure 1: CouchSurfing Host Searching Filters

Personal Information

Personal information includes pictures and textual descriptions. The textual content describes couch surfers' individual characteristics and experience. Content of personal information usually consists: personal description, how one participates in CouchSurfing, couch surfing experience, personal interests, personal philosophy, favorite music, movies and books, types of people one enjoys socializing with, things one wants to teach, learn and share, and one's opinion on the CouchSurfing project (CouchSurfing, 2012). If the general information gives an outline of a couch surfer's frame, this personal information segment fills in the color and details with the assistance of personal pictures.

In network hospitality 1.0, members' information was restricted to contact information and a paragraph or two of personal description due to the page limitations. For network hospitality 2.0, members are allowed to put down as many words as they would like. More detailed descriptive information in network hospitality 2.0 potentially increases the chances for travelers to discover people they share common interests or people they would like to socialize.

Friends List

Similar to other SNSs, CouchSurfing maintains a friends list on each user's profile, which is another advantage of network hospitality 2.0 that network hospitality 1.0 was not able to provide. The different part CouchSurfing friends' list from other major SNSs lies in the information it presents. In addition to the basic information like a friend's name and a profile picture of this friend, CouchSurfing friends' list also reveals this friend's age, gender, location, and relationship history. The relationship history section contains information about when and how a person became friends with other

people (e.g.: met at a local event, surfed with or being hosted) and the type of their friendship (e.g.: close friend, good friend, couch surfing friend, etc.). This more detailed description about a person's friends and their friendship history provides researchers rich information about how online and offline relationships are built. Additionally, the friendship history also generates a potential pool for researchers to build a survey sampling system.

Vouching and Verification

CouchSurfing installed two major ways to ensure security: vouching and verification. Vouch is a system for “members to declare their trust in other members” (CouchSurfing, 2012). If a couch surfer is vouched for, it indicates he/she is a highly trustworthy person in the community. A couch surfer has to be vouched for by at least three other members before he/she can vouch for others. Verification is another indication of security. CouchSurfing will verify member's identity and location based on request. In order to get verified, a couch surfer needs to complete three steps on the verification page: 1) provide his/her real name and address to CouchSurfing; 2) confirm his/her identity with a secure payment of twenty five dollars; 3) receive a postcard with a verifying code. After putting that code back into the verification page, a green check mark will appear on his/her profile indicating this member's identity and location are both checked by CouchSurfing.

Both vouching and verification indicates high level of trustworthiness of a couch surfer (CouchSurfing, 2012). However, CouchSurfing also points out that being vouched for and being verified does not 100% guarantee safety. In this case, what indicators do couch surfers use to guarantee their safety while traveling? CouchSurfing encourages all

couch surfers practice common sense and direct communication. Yet, what factors does this “common sense” include? This question will be addressed in chapter four: a factor analysis of couch surfers’ filtering factors in deciding hosting and surfing.

Couch Information

Couch information is one of the unique aspects of CouchSurfing as a social networking site, but necessary as a hospitality network. In couch information section, members describe their hosting situation and preferences. There are simple descriptions of couch availability, preferred gender, smoking policies, and preferences of children and pets, wheelchair accessibility, and maximum number of surfers per night. Most couch surfers also include a picture of the living conditions and a few paragraphs explaining the hosting environment and policies. This information helps to build a common understanding of the individual rules and expectations between hosts and surfers. For example, figure 2 shows one couch surfer’s couch information. He also describes his couch as “Our couch is very comfortable sitting in the living room. We've slept on it many times dozing on a lazy day. We also have a twin/king transformer air mattress if you prefer to sleep in our office.”

Couch Information

Can you host?

[edit](#)

Couch Available: Yes

Preferred Gender: Any

No smoking allowed

Has children: No

Can host children: No

Has pets: No

Can host pets: No

 **Wheelchair Accessible:** Yes

Max Surfers Per Night: 2

Shared Sleeping Surface: Depends

Shared Room: Depends

Figure 2: Couch Information

Host References

In addition to the uniqueness of friends' list and couch information, CouchSurfing maintains a reference system. There are two parts in a reference: a quantitative evaluation of the experience and a qualitative description of the experience. The quantitative rating divided the experience into three scales: positive, neutral and negative. The qualitative part usually involves one to two paragraphs of description of the in-person meeting.

These descriptions vary from meeting experience to comments about a fellow couch surfer's personality. For example, after surfing Marcello, he wrote on my profile "Xiao's probably one of my favorite guests ever, not only for the delicious Chinese dinner she's prepared, but for her whole attitude towards CS: she's been a very considerate guest and it's been a pleasure to share some conversations with her over a beer or a dinner.

Definitely welcome back to my place anytime!"

On the one hand, this reference system functions similar to eBay or Amazon customer reviews. It allows travelers to comment other couch surfers and their

experiences. By reading these references, fellow couch surfers get to know a person not only by their own descriptions but also by other people's comments (CouchSurfing, 2013). On the other hand, CouchSurfing reference system is different from eBay or Amazon's review system in three major ways. First, eBay and Amazon reviews are mostly anonymous. Customers generally have never met their product provider. However, couch surfers write references after they have met in person. There is no anonymity between referrers and referee. Additionally, eBay and Amazon's reviews are one directional from customers to products while CouchSurfing's reference are reciprocal. These two differences lead to the third difference, ratings. EBay and Amazon users' rates vary from 1 to 5 while most CouchSurfing references are positive. Adamic, Lauterbach, Teng and Ackerman (2010) also noticed this lack of negative references in couch surfing reference system, which is caused by the fear of reciprocated negative reference and discomfort in leaving negative references in public. However, the limitation of Adamic et al's study is that it pertains to a single community with a specific culture (Adamic et al, 2010). They suggested future studies should explore across culture studies, which is addressed in article three.

Similar to the majority of SNSs CouchSurfing consists of personal information in different sections, such as general information, personal information, and friends list (Golbeck, 2008), and so resembles many electronic commerce (e-commerce) websites' product information. Different from other SNSs such as Facebook, CouchSurfing also maintains a section of "references", which similar to the customer review section on many ecommerce websites. In other words, a couch surfer's online profile is "selling" a couch surfer to other couch surfers by the profile owner's personal description and

comments about this person from other couch surfers. These profiles can provide rich information about a person, which can then be used by both other couch surfers and researchers as this is public information. For couch surfers, before the encounter, they use other members' online profile to find a host. During the encounter, the profile information can serve as conversational topics with the host. After the encounter, couch surfers also use their profile as a platform to express their experience after the couch surfing activity, especially in the reference section. For researchers, each step yields rich information about travelers' experiences. Couch surfing can be broken down into three phases: pre-travel, travel/stay, and post-travel). Pre-travel consists of the couch surfer gathering host information and decision-making. Travel/stay is the actual period of time a surfer stays with a host. Post-travel experience sharing is the feedback a surfer leaves for a host. This study focuses on each of the three phases of couch surfing individually in attempt to understanding couch surfers' experience as a whole.

A Brief Review of Relevant Literature

In examining accounts of couch surfers' experiences in three steps: before, during, and after their trip, three major themes were explored: factors that enable couch surfers meetings before the encounter, couch surfers' offline experiences during the encounter and couch surfers' comments on their experience after the in-person meeting. The relevant literature is reviewed for each theme. For the first theme, tourism studies relating to social networking sites were reviewed, including: 1) research that focus on travelers' information search and sharing via social networking sites. 2) Studies that address online travel-oriented communities' impact on travelers' experience. 3) Studies that address the factors important to travelers' interactions with others online and offline. The second

theme mainly addresses the literature of authenticity, including the definition and major categories of authenticity studies. The second theme illustrates MacCannell's (1976) original explanation of authenticity, later theorists' objective authenticity, constructive authenticity and existential authenticity. Lastly, studies regarding to customer-generated online reviews are examined, particularly the ones about travelers' reviews due to the similarity of couch surfers' references and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).

In addition to the theoretical frame work related studies, a group of more recent work on understanding the interaction and experience between the social networks and travelers in the Internet era are reviewed. These studies are presented according to the research questions of each manuscript. Altogether, network hospitality (Molz, 2011) and the usages of social networking sites by travelers are studied. For example, social media and travel experience sharing (Gretzel, Yoo & Purifoy, 200; Milano et al, 2011; Helleman & Grovers, 2005; Ip, Lee & Law, 2012); social media and travel information searching (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Chai, 2010); and social media and trip planning (O'Conner, 2011; Kusumasondjaja, 2011; Ip et al, 2012). These more recent works indicate a research gap requiring further study of information and experiencing sharing in non-commercialized SNSs. Finally, the literature review addresses some scholarly work that is specifically focused on CouchSurfing (e.g.: Molz, 2011; Zuev, 2011; Bialski, 2011; Steylaerts & O'Dubhghaill, 2011; Chen, 2011; Buchberger, 2011; Rosen, et al., 2011). From this review, a theoretical rationale of how authenticity, eWOM, and social networking sites usages in tourism will explain the current research's attempt to fill in the research gaps discussed from the previous studies.

The Research Setting

The focus of this research is to explore the authentic experiences of travelers in the context of network hospitality 2.0, particularly using CouchSurfing as an example. First, the CouchSurfing website will be studied to better understand the content and the functionality of the website. Next couch surfers will be interviewed and surveyed. The experiences of the researcher as a fellow couch surfer and researcher will facilitate this aspect. Since the over five million couch surfers all over the world, it is essentially impossible to cover the experiences of people from every country due to constraints of time, money and language differences. Thus, this investigation primarily focuses on couch surfers from the top ten populated couch surfing countries, namely United States, Germany, France, Canada, England, Spain, Italy, Brazil, Australia, and China.

Currently there are over five million registered users (CouchSurfing, 2013), grown from a few thousand since the website's creation in 2004. This fast growth results in a large number of users with few or no couch surfing experience and therefore nearly blank profiles. In order to gather the most information from the experience, this study will focus on those couch surfers who call themselves "seasoned couch surfers," those possessing the most surfing and hosting experiences. The subjects are defined as having "more couch surfing experience" and possessing at least 100 references from other surfers. The assumption is that the more individual experiences the surfer possesses, the deeper the understanding of the total experience and therefore the richer the data yield will be.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to understand travelers' experiences in context of network hospitality 2.0. Particularly, this study will focus on couch surfers' experiences before, during, and after their travel with the assistance of CouchSurfing. The following research questions will direct the path of this study and subsequent articles:

RQ1: What experience does CouchSurfing create for travelers, before, during, and after their travel?

RQ2: How does a couch surfer's experience relate to authenticity in context of network hospitality 2.0?

Methodology and Methods

Research methodologies should be guided by research interests and specific research questions so that more appropriate methods can be used to collect data. The primary purpose of this study is to explore the Network Hospitality 2.0 users' experiences, using CouchSurfing as a case study. Particularly, this study focuses on couch surfers' experience before, during and after their encounter with another couch surfer in three independent manuscripts. Among the available research methods, semi-structured interviews, online survey and textual analysis were adopted to address the research questions in each manuscript. Case study is a research strategy that investigates a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded system (cases) through multiple sources of detailed and in-depth information (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, case study research is very useful when the research investigates a how or why question "about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control" (Yin, 1994, p.9). Additionally, case study has strength to investigate a phenomenon in its context (Rowley,

2002). This allows researcher to better understand the phenomenon in its natural state without the interference from a laboratory or experimental setting. The current study examines how social networking sites are influencing travelers' experiences. Thus, case study methodology is an appropriate method to answer this question according to Yin. Moreover, this study attempts to understand travelers' experience in their nature environment. Using the specific case (CouchSurfing) allows the researcher to comprehend how social networking sites impact travelers' experience.

Based on Creswell's (2007) definition of case study, the current research is investigating one bounded system (CouchSurfing) through multiple sources including semi-structured interview, online survey and textual analysis in order to generate rich information for deeper understanding of travelers' experience. Creswell believes a researcher may start with "a qualitative method for exploratory purposes and following up with a quantitative method with a large sample so that the researcher can generalize results to a population" (p. 16). As such, this research begins with semi-structured interviews to explore the views and experience of couch surfers. Then an online survey was used address the factors couch surfers perceive as important from a profile. Finally, the last article reflects the couch surfers' experience after they encounter their hosts. A textual analysis is used to explore the experiences expressed by couch surfers in their online reviews after their travel.

Qualitative research interview is a professional interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee in order to understand the deeper meaning of a phenomenon from the participants' perspective and to discover the meaning of their experiences (Kvale, 1996, 2007). Interviews can generate deep contextual understanding

of participants' experiences and their interpretation of their experiences (Schultze & Avital, 2011). Part of this study is to understand couch surfers' experiences and their perceptions of the experience. Interview method is thus adopted to discover what couch surfers think and feel about their traveling experience using network hospitality 2.0 (CouchSurfing). Additionally, interview method is utilized in this study because the contextual aspects and couch surfers' language use are considered essential in gaining insights into their perceptions.

Among multiple types of interview methods, semi-structure interview was selected in this study. Semi-structure interview is "more or less open-ended questions (that) are brought to the interview situation in the form of an interview guide" (Flick, 1998, p.94). This interview approach is chosen for its flexibility of questioning yet not losing the research focus. Guiding questions allow the researcher to address the major interests of this study. However, the conversational and flexible nature of semi-structured interview gives participants the opportunities to express themselves freely. Additionally, the flexibility of semi-structured interview allows the researcher to expand and add follow-up questions to access participants' perspectives.

Survey is a research method that "involves systematic observation to describe a natural population and, generally, draw inferences about causation or patterns of influence from systematic co-variation in the resulting data." According to Schmidt (1997), web-based survey method has several advantages in comparison to traditional paper surveys. First, web-based surveys can collect large samples over a wider range of geographical locations. Currently, there are over 5.5 million couch surfers in over 207 countries around the world. Online surveys could assist to obtain a wider sample of couch

surfers. Second, web-based surveys are cost and time efficient. It is unimaginable to conduct in-person surveys that can cover as large variant samples as the online surveys. Third, web-based surveys reduced the chance of error for entering survey responses if collected in paper. Regardless of these advantages online survey has over in-person surveys, one of the biggest concerns of web-based survey method is biased against people who do not use Internet (Schmidt, 1997). However, this is not a problem since all couch surfers have to use internet to access CouchSurfing website. For these reasons, online survey method is adopted in this study to examine the specific factors couch surfers perceive important in their decision making process before traveling.

Last, textual analysis is utilized in analyzing couch surfers' experience after their encounter with their hosts. Textual analysis is a method for gathering information about how members of a culture or subculture make sense of the world around them (McKee, 2003). The experience of traveling to another place is potentially a process of making sense of oneself, the places, people and culture one visited, and eventually the world one lives in. As such, the textual analysis attempts to determine couch surfers' experiences as revealed in the references they post on host's profiles. Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994) explain that text analysis offers an opportunity to deeply understand meaning by looking closely at words chosen and consider elements such as tone, diction, voice, allusions and attitude toward the audience. On the CouchSurfing website, there are already millions of references couch surfers articulated about their experiences. As the website indicates references are supposed to be the valid descriptions of couch surfers' experiences (CouchSurfing, 2013). These references provided an ideal channel for researchers to understand couch surfers' experiences by closely looking at the texts they contained.

In sum, case study offers possibilities of generating richer, deeper, and wider understanding of the multiple facets of couch surfing in its actuality in which it occurs. Semi-structured interview was used to gain a wholistic understanding of couch surfers' experience before, during and after their couch surfing journey. Online survey was used to examine couch surfers' perception on the factors that they consider important when evaluating their hosts online and making surfing decisions. Textual analysis was adopted to scrutinize the nuances and specific language used to express couch surfers' experiences.

Organization of Chapters

Targeting at one specific topic at a time, the current research is presented in three independent manuscripts. The articles were presented in chapters two, three, and four. Chapter Two focuses on the factors that reflect couch surfers assessment of their fellow couch surfers before making a hosting decision online. Chapter Three discusses the experience of couch surfers in the context of network hospitality 2.0. Chapter Four addresses the articulation of couch surfers' experiences, specifically from the references couch surfers left for their hosts afterwards. In addition, a conclusion chapter facilitates the understanding of a wholistic couch surfing experience derived from the data collected and analyzed in each of the three manuscripts. Each manuscript contains as independent introduction, relevant literature review, methodology, results and discussions, conclusion, references and appendixes. A general reference list regarding to the introduction and overall conclusion is provided at the end of the entire study.

**CHAPTER TWO: A RASCH APPLICATION ON COUCH SURFING DECISION
MAKING¹**

¹ To be submitted to Tourism Management.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of staying in a stranger's home for free seems crazy to most people. However, millions of people have done so through hospitality exchange social networks since Bob Lukweiler established SERVAS International in 1949. SERVAS is one of the early hospitality exchange social networking organizations that provide seasonal contact lists of other members with a short description of members (SERVAS International, 2013). SERVAS allows people who enroll to stay with other members around the world for free while traveling. In the past few decades, hospitality exchange networks developed drastically with the assistance of the personal computer and Internet (Bialski, 2007). For example, similar to SERVAS, CouchSurfing is an online hospitality exchange social networking site (SNS) that enables people to stay at other CouchSurfing members' (also known as couch surfers) homes globally. It grew from a few thousand members in 2004 to currently over 5.5 million members in over 200 countries (CouchSurfing, 2013).

This booming of hospitality exchange networks has had a significant impact on the tourism industry; however, this topic is largely under-researched (Steylaerts & Dubhghaill, 2011). A handful of studies have addressed hospitality exchange networks like CouchSurfing. This previous research mainly focused on couch surfers' experiences after their encounter (i.e., Molz, 2011; Bialski, 2011; Lauterbach, Truone, Shah, & Adamic, 2009; Buchberger, 2011). Little is known how couch surfers make a surfing decision based on other members' online profiles. A few previous studies have identified a few factors, such as vouching, references, friendship and trust (Lauterbach et al., 2009), cultural perspectives, language, and pictures (Chen, 2011), reciprocity (Lauterbach et al., 2009; Chen, 2011; Tan, 2010), gender (Buchberger, 2011) and space (Zuev, 2011) that

seem to affect the surfing decision making. Additionally, Bialski (2011) briefly mentioned that couch surfers make trusting judgments based on various cues online, such as age, gender, occupation and country of origin. However, previous studies did not specify how these cues and factors function in couch surfers' judgment process. In these studies, the determining factors have been drawn mainly from qualitative inquiries. As such, this study attempts to take one step further to explore the factors that couch surfers use to make their surfing decisions.

In order to examine the factors that couch surfers base their decisions upon, the possible factors that influence these decisions need to be identified. This supports Bialski's (2011) statement that couch surfers do seek cues to make trust judgments based on online information, in this case a couch surfer's online profile. Typically, a couch surfer's profile consists of a variety of information that can be categorized into five sections according to their inherent characteristics: demographic information (i.e., user name, age, gender, country of origin, education, etc.), personal information (i.e., personal descriptions, pictures, personal interests etc.), security information (i.e., vouch, location check, identity check), couch information (i.e., couch availability, preferred gender, smoking policies, maximum number of surfers per night, etc.), and network information (i.e., friends list, references). In other words, a completed couch surfer's online profile can provide rich information about a person, which is the major source for other couch surfers to determine whether to surf this person. Yet, it is not clear which information exactly couch surfers value and how much they weigh that information for their couch surfing decision making. As such, this study seeks to measure the importance of these

factors in couch surfers' perceptions that ultimately influence couch surfer offline encounters.

In short, the purpose of this study is to examine the online factors that lead to offline encounters between couch surfers. This manuscript presents a Rasch analysis of perceived weights of the factors that couch surfers apply to their surfing decision-making. Particularly, this study sampled 491 couch surfers from the top ten populated countries of couch surfers, namely United States, Germany, France, Canada, England, Spain, Italy, Brazil, Australia, and China. Surveys were distributed to measure couch surfers' perceptions of the importance of components on another host couch surfer's profile when they are making a surfing decision. The following two research questions are raised: 1) what are the online factors that impact couch surfers' decision-making to stay with a host? and 2) which factors are most likely to be perceived important by couch surfers in their decision making process?

PERCEIVED WEIGHTS OF ONLINE FACTORS FOR OFFLINE ENCOUNTERS

2.1 Review of Relevant Literature

Social networking sites commonly refer to the "virtual communities where users can create individual public profiles, interact with real-life friends, and meet other people based on shared interests" (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011, p. 3529). A few major themes have been addressed about travel-oriented SNSs such as travel information search, trip planning, experience sharing, virtual communities, and trust of travel related e-commerce. First, the group of studies focused on the travel information search and trip planning on SNSs has found that SNSs play a very significant role when travelers search

for information and plan their trips (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Chai, 2010; O' Conner, 2011; Kusumasondjaja, 2011; Ip et al, 2012). For example, Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) stated that 95% of their respondents trust online information for trip planning. Additionally, Xiang and Gretzel (2010) confirmed that some SNSs (e.g., TripAdvisor, VirtualTourist, and IgoUGo) are so comprehensive and popular that they are likely to “evolve into primary online travel information sources” (p.186). These studies particularly pointed out that blogs and social networking sites are functioning more and more importantly in travelers’ information search that used to be “dominated by traditional suppliers” (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In sum, these studies assist in understanding how in commercialized situations travelers uses SNSs, however, more information is needed in none-commercialized settings.

Yet, it is not very clear how travelers evaluate the information they searched from the social networking sites. Some researchers maintain that consumers recognize peer reviews as one of the most important sources of information while making travel-related decisions (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009, Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The references of previous surfers who have stayed with a host posted on CouchSurfing serves a purpose similar to peer reviews, which includes the comments and experience description couch surfers leave on each other’s profile after their encounter. As such, it seems safe to predict that couch surfers’ references will be perceived more important than other components.

A second set of studies addresses the online communities in the realm of tourism (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003; Kim, Lee, & Hiemstra, 2004; Chung, Buhalis, & Petrick, 2010). For example, some studies explored how

travelers express their opinion and share their experience through these virtual travel-oriented communities such as *virtuالتourist.com* (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004). Another example is that Ip, Lee, & Law (2010) profiled the users of travel website in Hong Kong. They surveyed the characteristics of persons who use travel websites for trip planning and experience sharing. The results found there is no statistical significance in the use of website for trip planning across age, gender and education. However, younger respondents are more likely to share their experience online than older respondents. These studies provided background information for the present investigation to address the process of travelers' decision making based on the online information and online experience sharing.

A third group of studies explored travelers' trust in using SNSs from a perspective of e-commerce and online shopping behavior (i.e., Wu & Chang, 2006; Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2009; Kim, Chung, & Lee, 2011). Researchers also point out that trust is accepted as a crucial factor for the ultimate success of person-website interactions, but more attention is needed to determine the factors directly impacting this success (Corritore, Kracher, & Wiedenbeck, 2003). Some studies have explored the factors that influence trust. For example, Bart, Shankar, Sultan and Urban (2005) stated that website characteristics and consumer personality both are important contributors to online trust. Kim et al (2011) finds that the website navigation functionality has a positive impact on how much travelers perceive the website to be trustworthy. Yoo et al. (2009) discover that the traveler-generated reviews and photos posted by other travelers tend to be viewed as more trustworthy than the same content posted by commercial suppliers, which also confirms the importance of user-generated reviews.

In sum, previous research addressed travelers' usage of SNSs. This study extended previous research by exploring the specific information travelers are paying more attention to. Studies that focused on trust generated in SNSs concentrated more on travelers' behaviors in online shopping and e-commerce settings. CouchSurfing is a SNS that reveals greater amount of trust in none-commercial online information. After all, couch surfers trust the online profiles of another stranger enough to eventually stay in that person's home. What information gives them the faith to take the leap? As such, this study examines the particular information couch surfers are paying more attention to while searching for information to make their plans of staying in a stranger's home.

2.2 Methods

2.2.1 Sampling and Data Collection

This study used online survey to collect data. Survey is a research method that systematically collects information from a targeted group of people using standardized questions about their characteristics, actions, attitudes, or opinions (Pinsonneault & Kraemer, 1993). Online survey advantages itself from other research methods and traditional in-person survey in several ways. First, it assists researchers to collect data on phenomena that cannot be directly observed (Babbie, 1973). Second, online survey can cover larger geographical locations (Schmidt, 1997). For this study, couch surfers are found in 207 different countries. Online survey provided a method to reach couch surfers in these countries. Third, online surveys are cost and time efficient. The current study selected the top 10 populated countries as targeted area. Fourth, online surveys reduced the chance of error for entering survey responses if collected in paper. Regardless of

these advantages online survey has over in-person surveys, one of the major concerns of web-based survey method is biased against people who do not use Internet (Schmidt, 1997). However, given the vary nature of couch surging is internet based, this is a non-issue for this study. For these reasons, online survey method is adopted in this study to examine what factors couch surfers perceive important in their decision making process before traveling.

In this study, experienced couch surfers are considered as experts with the same assumption that they would be able to identify more important factors that contribute to successful surfing experience. The Rasch model presumes that the examiners of items know their area of expertise (Bond & Fox, 2001). Thus, they are “not behaving in a random or precipitous way” and are supposed to be able to identify “better or lesser display of ability” (p. 108). “Experienced” is indicated by using CouchSurfing’s search filter. On CouchSurfing website, there is an internal search engine with filters, such as experience, last login time, oldest profile and newest profile. When filtering the results with experience, the more experienced couch surfers are listed at the very top. Before filtering the results with experience, couch surfers are selected by location. There are ten countries with the largest numbers of couch surfers: United States, Germany, France, Canada, England, Spain, Italy, Brazil, Australia, and China. Within each country, CouchSurfing has a list of popular places. For example, in United States, the list of popular places includes New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco Bay, Chicago, Washington, Seattle, Bellevue, Boston, San Diego, etc. For this study, the first six places in each country were selected. Then at each place, the top 30 experienced couch surfers were invited to take the survey.

A total of 1,800 individual invitations were sent to experienced couch surfers in 60 different cities among 10 countries. Within two weeks of data collection period, a total of 544 (responding rate 30.2%) couch surfers filled in the survey. The professional survey service-provider companies reported approximately 10% to 20% of response rate in online surveys with no incentive and no follow-up reminder (SurveyMonkey, 2013; Harris Interactive, 2013; People Pulse, 2013). According to Kittleson (1997) and Yun & Trumbo (2008), a researcher should expect a response rate between 25% and 30% from an e-mail survey with no follow-up reminders. As such, the response rate of this study (30.2%) is acceptable both by industrial and academic standards. After eliminating missing data, 491 participants' responses were analyzed. Among the 491 participants, there are 45% female respondents (N=221) and 55% male respondents (N=270) with an average age of 32.5 (SD=9.8, Max=73, Min=18).

Table 1

<i>Participant Characteristics (N = 491)</i>		
Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
18 to 24	76	15.48
25 to 29	145	29.53
30 to 34	131	26.68
35 to 39	54	11.00
40 to 49	46	9.37

50 to 59	24	4.89
60+	15	3.05
Gender		
Female	221	45.00
Male	270	55.00

2.2.2 Instrument

A 38-item scale (table 2) was developed based on couch surfers' online profiles. On CouchSurfing website, there are several standard components every registered member is requested to complete as his/her profile. To measure each item's perceived importance level, seven-point Likert scales (1=not important at all, 2=low importance, 3=slightly important, 4=neutral, 5=moderately important, 6=very important, 7=extremely important) were used based on suggestion of Likert-Type Scale Response Anchors (Vagias, 2006). Survey data was analyzed with the Rasch measurement computer program, WINSTEPS (Version 3.75.0).

Table 2: Thirty-eight Items in five categories.

Demographic	Gender, Age, Membership Time, Language, Nationality, Last Login
Information	Time, Education
Personal	Picture, Personal Description, Couch Surfing Experience Description, Interests Description, Philosophy Description, Music Description,
Information	Movies Description, Books Description, Types of People One enjoy, Teach Learn and Share, One Amazing Thing They've Seen or Done,

	Opinion on the Couch Surfing Project, Location Traveled,
Security Information	Identity Checked, Location Verified, Vouch
Couch Information	Couch Availability, Smoking, Has Children, Can Host Children, Has Pets, Can Host Pets, Wheelchair Accessibility, Max Surfers per Night, Shared Sleeping Surface, Shared Room.
Network Information	Friends, Reference Number, Positive Reference, Neutral Reference, Negative Reference,

2.2.3 Rasch Model

This study utilizes Rasch model to analyze the data. Rasch model was originally developed as a measurement model under the framework of Item Response Theory (IRT) (Rasch, 1960; Wright & Master 1982). In traditional IRT, the major logic is to create a mathematical model that measures the probability of how successful a *person* can be on an *item* based upon the *person's ability* and the *item difficulty* (Wu & Adams, 2007). Person ability and item difficulties are defined in relation to each other on the same scale (Bond & Fox, 2001). Thus, a person's ability can be used to predict the person's performance on an item without having to administer the item to the person. Additionally, Rasch model is commonly used to evaluate item difficulty using experts as persons (Linacre, 2002). This unique ability to assess item difficulty can be applied in other social situations to examine attitudes or perceptions with similar logic. For this study, Rasch model is utilized for experts (i.e., experienced couch surfers) to judge the item difficulty (i.e. components' importance).

Rasch model as a special type of IRT originally provided a mathematical model to assess the students' ability in relation to test items' difficulty (Rasch, 1960). It also is widely used in psychometrics to measure a person (i.e., respondents' abilities, attitudes or traits) in relation to the items such as attitudinal scales (Vila & Kuster, 2011). For example, Strong, Daughters, Lejuez, and Breen (2004) have measured students' attitudes and beliefs about gambling and have reliably identified 10 items that are accounted for students' gambling behavior. In their study, Rasch model is used as estimate how much each student agrees with the gambling attitudes and the severity of each item's content in order to determine how much students agree with these items. Similarly, the current study explores how much individual couch surfers perceive the importance of each item on the potential host's profile. Specifically, the present application of Rasch model measures 491 persons' perceptions of the importance of 38 items that assist their travel decision making online. Items refer to the components of a couch surfer's profile (i.e., gender, nationality, reference, picture, etc.). Persons refer to couch surfers. Person ability refers to couch surfer's experience and item difficulty refers to components' importance on a couch surfer's profile.

The Rasch model can also be used to examine the difficulty of items and put them into order (Bond & Fox, 2001). When estimating an item's difficulty, experts are usually invited to give scores to each item. According to Bond and Fox (2001), experts are supposed to be able to identify the difficulty of each item in comparison to other items. For example, a mathematics teacher should be able to identify the difficulty order of the twenty mid-term exam items on a grade two math exam. Since item "difficulties" refer to the weights of importance that experienced couch surfers assigned to the profile

components, following the Rasch model logic, experienced couch surfers, serving as experts in this study, should be able to assign different “weights” to a couch surfer’s profile components.

Besides personal ability and item difficulty, the Rasch model also assumes that the total text score on all the items represent the person ability (Bond & Fox, 2001). In other words, the personal ability is estimated greater when a higher total score is obtained. In this study, a higher total score is achieved by respondents’ perception of more items being important. In a situation where a couch surfer is deciding whether to stay with a stranger, it is only reasonable to gain as much information as possible to make educated decisions. Thus, it seems logical to assume more experienced couch surfers would address all the components on a profile than simply focusing on a few.

2.2.4 Data Analysis

The model data fit was assessed by Infit and Outfit statistics for each component and couch surfer in the Rasch analysis. Infit indicates the inlier-sensitive or information-weighted fit (Linacre, 2002). The Infit attributes more weight to “the performances of persons closer to item value” (Bond & Fox, 2001, p.43), which indicates that the person should be able to provide more insights about the item performance when their ability is closer to the item difficulty. Similarly, outfit refers to outlier-sensitive fit, but is more sensitive than Infit (Linacre, 2002). Infit and outfit is used to evaluate the model data fit (Linacre, 2002). According to Linacre (2002) and Lunz, Wright, and Linacre (1990), when Infit and outfit statistics is close to 1, the model data fit is considered satisfactory. When the value is greater than 1.5 or less than 0.5, model data is considered misfit. When

the value is less than 0.5, there is very little variation (e.g., highly similar ratings in the perceptions of importance across couch surfers towards a profile component or almost identical ratings by one couch surfer across all components). A value greater than 1.5 indicates inconsistency in perceptions of item importance. Additional to the evaluation of data as a whole model, data was divided into five sub-categories as shown in Table 1. Same data analysis on the whole model was performed on the sub-categories as well.

Validity of the items is assessed by Infit mnsq and the Outfit mnsq measures. Person validity is acquired from sampling. The Rasch model presumes that the examiners of items know their area of expertise (Bond & Fox, 2001). Thus, they are “not behaving in a random or precipitous way” and are supposed to be able to identify “better or lesser display of ability” (p. 108). In this study, experienced couch surfers are served as experts with the same assumption that they would be able to identify more important factors that contribute to successful surfing experience. Conventionally only person reliability is reported (Winsteps, 2012). Person and item reliability is assessed by Rasch Person Separation Reliability measures and reported with Cronbach’s alpha. High person separation reliability means that the variance between participants is more likely a result of reliable instrument than errors in the measurement (Allen, 2007). Cronbach’s alpha of this study is 0.87. According to (George & Malley, 2003), Cronbach’s alpha between 0.8 and 0.9 reflects good reliability. Thus, the instrument of this study is both valid and reliable.

2.3 Results

Overall, the model fit the data well. Thirty seven items’ Infit and outfit statistics were close to one except for one item. One item had fit statistics out of the acceptable

range (Smoke Infit=1.50 and Outfit=1.68). Figure 1 presents the relative positions of the persons (in this study the experienced couch surfers) over the 37 items (components extracted from a typical couch surfer's profile). High person logit indicates better ability to identify the perceived important components on a profile. High item logit indicates more importance of a component (Figure 1).

A summary of 37 items' difficulty parameter is reported in Table 3 together with standard error and fit statistics. The logit measures of item difficulty represent the importance of a component on CouchSurfing profile. The higher the item difficulty estimate, the more important that item was perceived by a couch surfer. The estimate of item difficulty ranged from -1.28 (least important) to 1.51 (most important) logits with a mean of 0.00 and standard deviation of 0.61. Negative reference was perceived to be the most important component (logit=1.51), followed by positive reference (logit =1.20) and couch availability (logit=1.18). Wheelchair accessibility was perceived to be the least important (logit=-1.28).

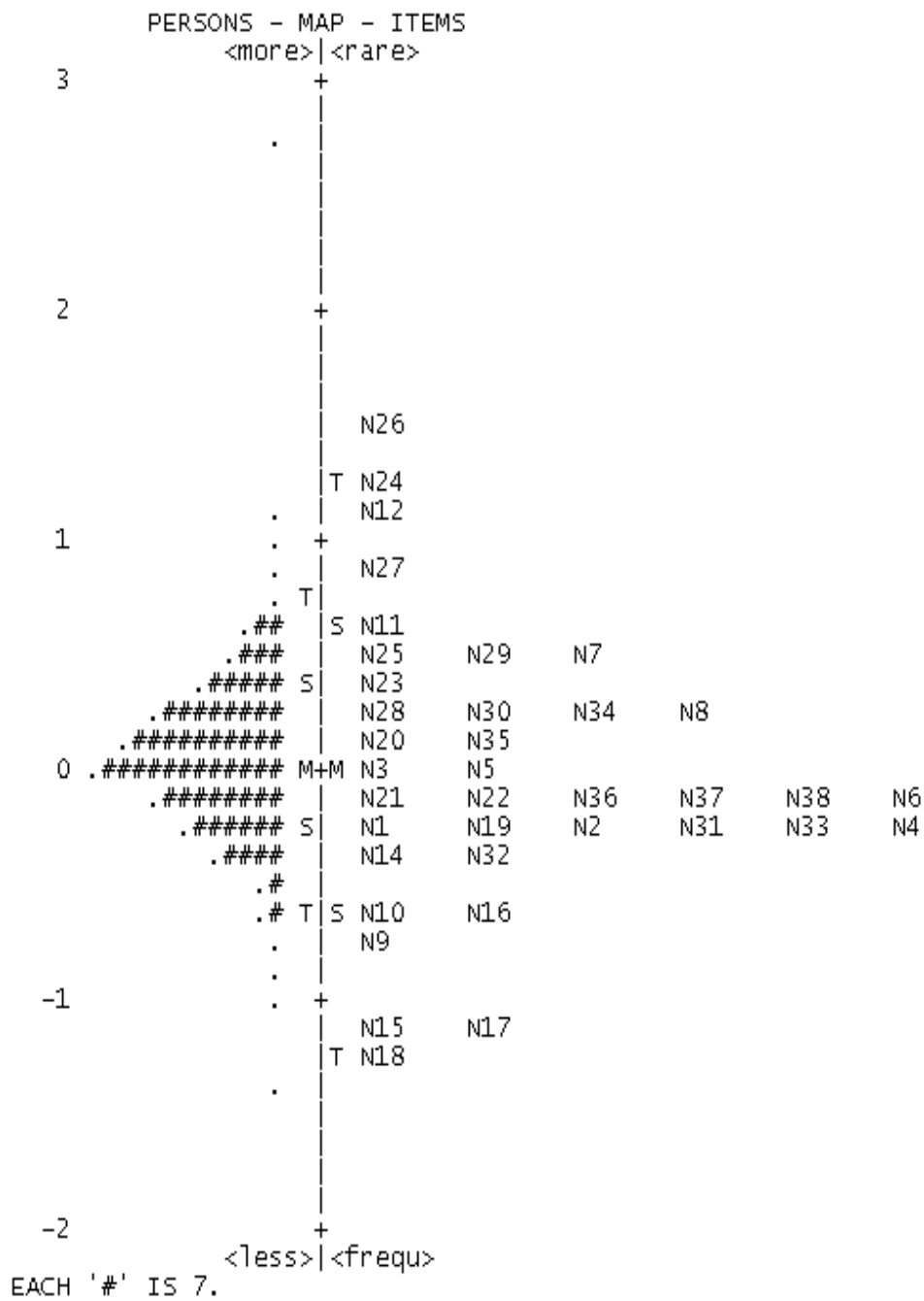


Figure 1: Map of Distribution of Items and Persons

Table 3: Perceived Importance of Components on CS Profile: Item Statistics

Item		Logit Measures		Fit Statistics (MNSQ)	
ID	Name	Difficulty	SE	Infit	Outfit
N26	Negative Reference	1.51	0.06	1.48	1.37
N24	Positive Reference	1.20	0.05	1.22	1.10
N12	Couch Availability	1.18	0.05	1.32	1.29
N27	Personal Description	0.90	0.04	0.95	0.90
N11	Pictures	0.67	0.04	1.38	1.35
N25	Neutral Reference	0.55	0.04	0.13	1.17
N29	Interests Description	0.55	0.04	0.77	0.73
N7	Last Login Time	0.47	0.04	1.43	1.39
N23	Reference Number	0.39	0.03	0.97	0.97
N28	CS Experience Description	0.27	0.03	0.80	0.79
N8	Language	0.26	0.03	1.24	1.26
N30	Philosophy Description	0.25	0.03	0.78	0.76
N34	Types of People One Enjoy	0.23	0.03	0.71	0.69
N20	Shared Sleeping Surface	0.13	0.03	1.00	1.40
N35	Teach, Learn, Share	0.09	0.03	0.74	0.74
N5	Age	0.00	0.03	0.96	0.96
N3	Vouch	-0.05	0.03	1.15	1.17
N36	Amazing Thing Seen Or Done	-0.10	0.03	0.74	0.74
N38	Location Traveled	-0.11	0.03	0.82	0.82
N6	Membership Time	-0.15	0.03	0.87	0.87
N37	Opinion On CS Project	-0.15	0.03	0.83	0.83
N21	Shared Room	-0.16	0.03	1.04	1.04
N22	Friends Number	-0.17	0.03	0.86	0.86
N19	Max Surfers Per Night	-0.21	0.03	1.30	1.32
N1	Identity Checked	-0.24	0.03	1.26	1.25
N4	Gender	-0.26	0.03	1.06	1.13
N31	Music Description	-0.28	0.03	0.77	0.76
N2	Location Verified	-0.30	0.03	1.23	1.23
N33	Books Description	-0.31	0.03	0.70	0.70
N14	Has Children	-0.32	0.03	1.09	1.08
N32	Movies Description	-0.35	0.03	0.68	0.68
N16	Has Pets	-0.57	0.03	1.21	1.24
N10	Education	-0.61	0.03	0.83	0.83
N9	Nationality	-0.71	0.03	0.99	1.00
N15	Can Host Children	-1.14	0.04	1.46	1.37
N17	Can Host Pets	-1.18	0.04	1.31	1.19
N18	Wheelchair Accessibility	-1.28	0.04	1.32	1.43

Note: Average Measure=a mean of logit measures in each item; SE=Standard Error; MNSQ=mean square residuals. CS=Couch Surfing

Five categories (demographic information, personal information, security information, couch information, network information) of items were analyzed separately with the Rasch model. Overall, all models and data fit the Infit and outfit statistics are all close to 1. Within demographic information, seven items were evaluated (Table 4). The estimate of item difficulty ranged from -0.84 to 0.77 logits with a mean of 0.00 (SD=0.55). Last login time (logit=0.77) was weighed the most important within the seven demographic items while nationality (logit=-0.84) was perceived to be the least important. The order of seven items in this sub model matches with the order in the whole model. Tables 5 to 8 reported the separate item difficulty estimates. The order of sub-model item difficulty matches with the whole model. Similar to table 4, item difficulty estimates with standard error and fit statistics are reported.

Table 4: Perceived Importance of Demographic Components on CS Profile: Item Statistics

Item		Logit Measures		Fit Statistics (MNSQ)	
ID	Name	Difficulty	SE	Infit	Outfit
N7	Last Login Time	0.77	0.04	0.88	0.89
N8	Language	0.64	0.03	0.87	0.87
N5	Age	0.17	0.03	0.96	0.99
N6	Membership Time	0.01	0.03	0.97	0.97
N4	Gender	-0.20	0.03	0.74	0.71
N10	Education	-0.56	0.04	1.34	1.34
N9	Nationality	-0.84	0.04	1.40	1.40

Note: Average Measure=a mean of logit measures in each item; SE=Standard Error; MNSQ=mean square residuals. CS=Couch Surfing

Table 5: Perceived Importance of Security Components on CS Profile: Item Statistics

Item		Logit Measures		Fit Statistics (MNSQ)	
ID	Name	Difficulty	SE	Infit	Outfit
N3	Vouch	0.30	0.05	0.73	0.67
N1	Identity Checked	0.11	0.05	0.63	0.61
N2	Location Verified	-0.41	0.05	1.53	1.53

Note: Average Measure=a mean of logit measures in each item; SE=Standard Error; MNSQ=mean square residuals. CS=Couch Surfing

Table 6: Perceived Importance of Personal Information Components on CS Profile: Item Statistics

Item		Logit Measures		Fit Statistics (MNSQ)	
ID	Name	Difficulty	SE	Infit	Outfit
N27	Personal Description	0.79	0.04	0.65	0.65
N11	Pictures	0.71	0.04	0.67	0.66
N29	Interests Description	0.66	0.04	0.82	0.79
N28	CS Experience Description	0.46	0.04	1.07	1.06
N30	Philosophy Description	0.38	0.04	1.30	1.41
N34	Types of People One Enjoy	0.37	0.04	0.89	0.89
N35	Teach, Learn, Share	0.05	0.04	0.87	0.84
N36	Amazing Thing Seen or Done	-0.18	0.04	0.84	0.77
N38	Location Traveled	-0.21	0.04	0.93	0.89
N37	Opinion on CS Project	-0.25	0.04	1.17	1.21
N31	Music Description	-0.68	0.05	0.84	0.79
N33	Books Description	-0.88	0.05	2.30	2.31
N32	Movies Description	-1.21	0.05	1.16	1.07

Note: Average Measure=a mean of logit measures in each item; SE=Standard Error; MNSQ=mean square residuals. CS=Couch Surfing

Table 7: Perceived Importance of Couch Information Components on CS Profile: Item Statistics

Item		Logit Measures		Fit Statistics (MNSQ)	
ID	Name	Difficulty	SE	Infit	Outfit
N12	Couch Availability	0.95	0.04	0.91	0.90
N20	Shared Sleeping Surface	0.86	0.04	0.86	0.70
N21	Shared Room	0.81	0.04	0.92	0.76

N19	Max Surfers Per Night	0.20	0.03	1.00	0.94
N14	Has Children	-0.09	0.03	1.03	1.01
N16	Has Pets	-0.21	0.03	1.09	1.04
N15	Can Host Children	-0.27	0.03	0.81	0.84
N17	Can Host Pets	-0.59	0.03	1.05	1.10
N18	Wheelchair Accessibility	-1.66	0.05	1.34	1.61

Note: Average Measure=a mean of logit measures in each item; SE=Standard Error; MNSQ=mean square residuals. CS=Couch Surfing

Table 8: Perceived Importance of Network Information Components on CSg Profile: Item Statistics

Item		Logit Measures		Fit Statistics (MNSQ)	
ID	Name	Difficulty	SE	Infit	Outfit
N26	Negative Reference	1.46	0.04	1.10	1.12
N24	Positive Reference	0.44	0.04	0.84	0.80
N25	Neutral Reference	0.16	0.05	.20	1.23
N23	Reference Number	-0.82	0.06	0.84	0.73
N22	Friends Number	-1.24	0.06	1.27	1.10

Note: Average Measure=a mean of logit measures in each item; SE=Standard Error; MNSQ=mean square residuals. CS=Couch Surfing

2.4 Discussions

As seen in the present investigation, there are a plethora of factors to consider when making a couch surfing decision. Previous research indicates that online information plays significant roles in travelers information search and trip planning (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Chai, 2010; O' Conner, 2011; Kusumasondjaja, 2011; Ip et al, 2012); yet, until the present investigation it has not been clear as to what exact factors or information are most important to the couch surfer's decision making process to stay or not stay with a host. CouchSurfing as a SNS provides rich information for its members to find other members to stay with all over the world. Couch surfers' profile captures most of these factors, for example, a couch surfer's location, availability of a couch surfers'

place, gender, age, personality, and reputation, etc. Thus, the purpose of this study is to use the Rasch Model to measure the factors weight in couch surfers' perceptions when they make surfing decisions based on online information available on the social networking site CouchSurfing.com.

The Rasch analysis results ranked all 37 items that fits the model, respectively: the top ten items are: negative reference, positive reference, couch availability, picture, neutral reference, personal interests' description, last login time, reference number and couch surfing experience description. Among the top ten items, four of the five network information items are ranked high among the top ten items on the importance hierarchy. Negative reference (logit =1.51) was perceived to be the most important component on a profile, followed by positive reference (logit=1.20). This result confirmed previous research findings that travelers pay a lot of attention to peer evaluated information (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009, Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). As they explained, travelers perceive other travelers' review of travel-related products important. The result of this study indicates that travelers also stress the significance of peer reviews on other people.

Among the top ten important items, personal information seems to be the second important category with four items: personal description (logit=0.90), picture (logit=0.67), personal interest description (logit=0.55) and couch surfing experience description (logit=0.27). It is not clear why these items are the most important according to couch surfers' perception. One rationale is that people tend to use CouchSurfing as a platform for people to make friends as Kuss and Griffiths (2011) describes the SNSs functions. These four items reveal the characteristics of a person couch surfers want to

encounter. Future research should follow up to explore why these items are perceived to have such high importance.

The other two items among the top ten important items are couch availability (logit=1.18) and last login time (logit=0.47). Couch availability reveals a couch surfer's hosting status: yes, maybe, not right now and I am traveling. It seems odd that couch availability, a place to stay, ranked only number three instead of number one. After all, without a couch, there is no need to make a surfing decision regardless of how attractive other components on that profile are. One possible explanation is that CouchSurfing offers a filter function in the search page. So couch availability on the profile is likely to be used as reassurance when making decisions. Another component that offers some indication of a couch surfer's hosting status is last login time. There is a higher chance to get a response from a couch surfer whose last login time is recent than someone who has not logged in for the past year. Given the fundamental importance of these items from the result, it seems reasonable to suggest CouchSurfing website to put these items at more prominent positions on a profile. Similarly, other travel sites may want to consider the location and layout of their information on the website regarding the items importance to users using the similar method.

Among all 37 items, the least important item perceived by couch surfers is wheelchair accessibility (logit=-1.28), which seems reasonable due to the physical demanding nature of couch surfing style traveling. Other items such as hosting pets and children were weighed very little in the process of making a surfing decision. At the bottom ten of the importance hierarchy, there are also items such as nationality, education, location verification, music, movies and books description. Since

CouchSurfing promotes tolerance and acceptance of difference among cultures, it is understandable most of these items were not perceived important. However, it is surprising to see location verification is also weighed low importance on the hierarchy, since CouchSurfing website uses it as a verification of security.

Besides location verification, two other security items, identity checked (logit=-0.24) and vouch (logit=-0.05), also both received very low scores in couch surfers' perceptions of important items. This finding confirms with Tran's (2009) interview results. Both location verification and identity verification were checked by CouchSurfing organization. Vouch is a status a member can gain from being voted highly trustworthy by other members who already have more than three vouches (CouchSurfing, 2012). Vouch is viewed as a sign of high security since vouches were only supposed to be given to people who one knows well (CouchSurfing 2012). However, Lauterbach and Shah (2008) pointed out that many vouches have been given to friends who have only weak friendship ties in France. They were worried this easy distribution of vouches among people who barely know each other may bring down the value of the vouch function. The result of couch surfers perceiving vouch as low importance may reflect couch surfers' awareness of Lauterbach and Shah's worries. Future research should explore the changes of couch surfers' perceptions of the security information and how these changes happened.

This study explored experienced couch surfers' perceptions of how important items on a profile are in their decision making process. One limitation is that people's perception sometimes does not match their behaviors. They may perceive certain factors to be important, yet surf with people whose profile does not even have those factors.

Future study may apply the current findings to experimental designs that explore couch surfers' actual behaviors. Additionally, there is variance among how experienced couch surfers are. This study selected couch surfers from 60 different cities in 10 countries. One couch surfer may appear on top of the experienced couch surfers list in one city, but in another city he may not be. For example, a couch surfer with 30 couch surfing experience would come up on top of Ottawa's list since Ottawa has about 4,500 couch surfers while a person need over 100 surfing experience to make the top 30 in New York where there are about 40,000 couch surfers. The next step of this study is to explore the relationship between this variance and the item ability measured by the Rasch model.

CONCLUSION

This study is an attempt to elaborate on travelers' usage of social networking sites using couch surfers' decisions on surfing with a stranger offline based on online information. Online items were first identified based on previous research and CouchSurfing webpage. The Rasch model assisted in ranking the items 491 couch surfers perceive important in their surfing decision making process. The results indicated that couch surfers weigh online information differently when making a decision for offline encounters with other couch surfers. Network information including peer evaluated comments gained the highest weight among couch surfers.

This study first confirmed previous research results that peer reviewed information is very important in travelers' search of information online. Additionally, using the Rasch model to rank online components' importance in travelers' perceptions serves as an example methodology for future travel websites to relocate information in a way that better assists travelers' needs of information searching. This study contributes to

the understanding of travelers' information search on SNSs in two major ways. First, previous studies mainly focused on commercialized SNSs, this study explored the travelers' information search in none-commercial settings. Specifically, previous research discovered that extreme reviews are not as important as neutral reviews for consumers (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). The findings of this investigation revealed that none-commercialized SNSs users perceive reviews with excessive use positive adjectives as the most important. This difference may be because of the consequence of mis-trust someone in a none-commercialized situation like CouchSurfing could be more severe. Future studies should compare travelers' usage of commercialized eWOM and none-commercialized eWOM. Second, previous research stated that information from SNSs influences travelers' trip planning and experience sharing (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006), this study extended previous research by examining the specific information travelers are paying attention to. More research is needed in why these travelers are addressing these particular factors.

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**CHAPTER THREE: THE PURSUIT OF AUTHENTICITY IN THE ERA OF
SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES²**

² To be submitted to Annals of Tourism Research.

INTRODUCTION

Since MacCannell (1976) introduced the stages of authenticity in tourism research, hundreds of articles and books have been published regarding authenticity and tourism. However, Dann (2002) points out that most of the studies concerning authenticity were done before the era of the personal computer, the Internet, blogs, and mobile phones' popularity. Additionally Buhalis and Law (2008) state that technological progress has dramatically impacted the tourism industry, especially with regard to the way people travel. Thus, the question remains whether the previous authenticity theories are applicable in today's technologically diverse travel world. For instance, people used to rely on travel agencies for tour information, however, in recent years social networking sites (SNSs) have become a popular tool for people to search for travel information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Chai, 2010). Travel anecdotes were mainly relayed to known acquaintances in person; but now SNSs provide a platform to share travel experience easily, both with friends and even with total strangers (Gretzel, Yoo & Purifoy, 2008; Milano et al, 2011; Helleman & Grovers, 2005; O' Conner, 2011; Kusumasondjaja, 2011; Ip et al, 2012). According to these researchers, the SNSs are playing an important role in today's travelers' trip planning and experience sharing. Therefore, studying SNSs-assisted experiences will help researchers gain a better understanding of authenticity through the new perspective of technological advancement.

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), the majority of SNSs assist the maintenance of established offline social networks, while some other sites provide opportunities for strangers to connect according to various shared interests, views, or activities, for instance CouchSurfing. Kuss and Griffiths (2011) defined SNSs as the

“virtual communities where users can create individual public profiles, interact with real-life friends, and meet other people based on shared interests” (p. 3529). This statement indicates that CouchSurfing can potentially provide vehicle for profound and meaningful experiences for over 6 million people globally. It is a “global network of travelers, adventure seekers and lifelong learners” who value trust in human nature and are enthusiastic about sharing cultures, hospitality and authentic experiences both for travelers and hosts (CouchSurfing, 2012). Rosen, Lafontaine, & Hendrickson (2011) state that the CouchSurfing website is an online platform primarily for couch surfers to find a free place to stay while traveling, as well as for meeting local people, and exchanging information and culture. In other words, CouchSurfing is an activity-centered SNS that serves as a platform for hospitality, information, and culture exchanging among travelers around the world. As one of the major travel-oriented SNSs, CouchSurfing provides a unique opportunity for researchers to gain insights regarding travelers’ experiences via SNSs.

Due to the popularity of CouchSurfing, a few studies (e.g.: Molz, 2011; Bialski, 2011; Chen, 2011; Steylaerts & O’ Dubhghaill, 2011) have specifically studied couch surfers’ experience with the regarding SNSs relationship with tourism. For example, Molz maintains that CouchSurfing creates a network that allows hosts and guests to bond in a ‘fluid, hybrid, non-commercial’ way that produces a sense of trust, togetherness, and emotional intimacy. More specifically, Bialski explores how encounters develop between strangers. He maintains couch surfing technologies foster closeness between strangers, and cites the example of couch surfers as they “become acquainted with one another, sometimes befriending, trusting, comforting, understanding and supporting one another.”

(p. 258). Additionally, Steylaerts and O'Dubhghaill examine couch surfing as an individuated experience, which emphasizes how each couch surfer is gaining a unique experience with their host that is not replicable by anyone else.

Unlike from Bialski and Molz's general approach, two researchers take the global concept of CouchSurfing to local practices in Taiwan (Chen, 2011) and Morocco (Buchberger, 2011). Chen compares Taiwanese and Westerners' experience of couch surfing. She observes that CouchSurfing practices a dominantly western value rather than illustrating an open and diverse culture. She argues that Taiwanese couch surfers practice couch surfing as relational tourism instead of Bialski's concept of emotional tourism in Westerners' experience. Buchberger identified that couch surfing is challenging in non-Western societies. For example, he finds that couch surfing can bring gossips to the members in Morocco, especially in situations when a single couch surfer is hosting surfers the opposite sex. Where Chen and Buchberger focus on one specific region in their respective studies, the present investigation seeks to explore surfer's experiences on a more global level.

In summary, Molz's (2011) research focuses more on the connections and trust between the strangers, Bialski, Steylaerts and Dubhghaill (2011) focuses more on the relationship between hosts and guests; whereas, Chen (2011) examined the cultural differences of a global concept in local practices. The present investigation will build upon the work of these previous scholars and seeks to explore a better understanding of existential authenticity in couch surfers' experiences from the top 10 populated countries. The current investigation differs from previous research in two major ways. First, this study interviewed couch surfers from five different countries to understand couch surfing

in a rich cultural diversity context as suggested by Rosen, Lafontaine and Hendrickson (2011) and Buchberger (2011). Second, the majority of current studies conducted on CouchSurfing concentrate more on the experience of trust, belonging, and emotional intimacy between hosts and guests (e.g. Molz, 2011; Bialski, 2011; Rosen et al, 2011), which are somewhat related to the inter-personal authenticity from Wang's (1999) existential authenticity. Building on Wang's work, the present study will seek to examine inter-personal authenticity in a more in-depth manner and add a new component by exploring the intra-personal aspect of existential authenticity.

The present investigation is a qualitative study of travelers who combine tourism and social networking sites in their travel and how this combination contributes to travelers' experience. CouchSurfing is selected as an example of travel oriented social networking sites due to its large member base and the opportunity it provides for couch surfers to stay at locals' residences. Couch surfer population is tracked by the country in which one currently resides. Meaning, a high-populated couch surfing country would be one that has a large majority of registered couch surfers who reside in that country. For example, the United States has 244,570 registered (CouchSurfing, 2013) and is considered among the top 10 most populated couch surfing countries. This study focuses on couch surfers from the top ten populated countries of couch surfers, namely United States, Germany, France, Canada, England, Spain, Italy, Brazil, Australia, and China. An existential perspective of authenticity is utilized for the purpose of better understanding travelers' quest for an authentic experience via social networking sites. Particular research questions explored are: what experience do travelers gain in the process of couch surfing? How is couch surfing experience related to MacCannell's (1976)

authenticity in the backstage? Can Wang's (1999) existential authenticity theory be applied to couch surfers' experiences? If so, how? If not, why not?

THE PURSUIT OF AUTHENTICITY

2.1 Review of Relevant Literature

Originally, authenticity was used to describe the objects in the museum, whether they are what they appeared to be, whether they worth the price they claimed, whether they worth the admiration being given (Trilling, 1972). Authenticity in museum emphasizes the genuine value and originality of an object. For example, the original painting of *Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh is an authentic piece of art. A forgery of *Starry Night* lacks authenticity no matter how proficient the imitation. Combining this museum concept of authenticity and Goffman's (1959) notion of front stage and back stage in tourism, MacCannell (1976) first introduced the concept of authenticity in the sociological studies of tourism.

MacCannell (1976) explained that tourists' motivation is to seek this genuine experience of other places and other people to escape from their daily life. However, the tourism industry by its nature impedes the pursuit of authenticity because it creates a front stage for the tourist. Goffman (1959) polarized the social settings into front stage and back stage where people "perform" for others in the front stage and retrieve to self at the back stage. Similarly, in tourism settings, in the front stage, festivals, cuisine, dress, rituals, cultural events and other toured objects are set up for tourists. In the back stage, the tourism industry related people retreat back to their normal life without having to perform certain "reality" to the tourists. As a result, tourists are not getting the authentic experience they expected.

MacCannell (1976) agrees that because of this front-back-stage setting in the tourism industry, most tourists are not getting the “real deal,” rather than an experience of an “authenticity” that is arranged for them. Yet MacCannell (1976) argues that Goffman’s (1959) polarized categorization of tourism settings was not sufficient in explaining the complexity of tourists’ experiences. Thus, he added four more stages to further explain the different levels of tourist’ experience. The experiences tourists gain from the first five states are referred to as staged authenticity. The last stage remains as back stage, which tourists are denied the access to, together with the authenticity that comes with the back stage (Pearch & Moscardo, 1986). One can infer that by gaining access to the back stage this would grant tourists the opportunity to gain authenticity.

Since MacCannell introduced the term authenticity in tourism studies, the definition has been discussed and extended by many other researchers. Spooner maintains that “authenticity is a conceptualization of elusive, inadequately defined, other cultural, socially ordered gain genuineness” (Spooner, 1986, p. 225). Rushdie explains that “authenticity is the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism. It demands that sources, forms, styles, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogenous and unbroken tradition” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 67). Additionally, Theobald believes that “authenticity means genuine, unadulterated, or the real thing” (Theobald, 1998, p. 411). More currently, Hillman defines authenticity as “an experience which genuinely samples the culture of the other, that is, of the host society and the host people” (Hillman, 2007, p. 2). These definitions demonstrate and capture the complex essence of authenticity.

Regardless of the various definitions of authenticity, Reisinger and Steiner (2006) argue that the researchers should abandon the term of authenticity due to the lack of

common ground on the existence, meaning or importance. However, Belhassen and Caton (2006) commented on Reisinger and Steiner's argument that tourism is a multidisciplinary social research discourse, whose nature is not to produce a definitive conclusion of an issue but to build knowledge further in a linearly accumulative manner. For the purpose of this study the researchers combined both Theobald and Hillman's definitions of authenticity. Theobald's definition focuses more on being real and genuine aspects while Hillman places more emphasis on the experience of the host culture. Thus, the adopted definition of authenticity for the present investigation is the genuine, unadulterated experience which allows a traveler to sample the real culture of the host society and the host people. Many researchers have studied authenticity extensively. Some researchers investigated in the limitations of MacCannell's authenticity as the motivation of tourists (Cohen, 1979; Pearce & Moscardo, 1986; Smith, 1989; Urry, 1990). They argue that tourists' motivations are not only for authenticity while traveling. For example, people who travel to visit friends and family, to enjoy nature, and to pursue personal hobbies such as sports, have little to do with authenticity. Others have focused on MacCannell's assertion that tourism denies the possibility of tourists gaining an authentic experience from the front stage (Pearce & Moscardo, 1986; Cohen, 1988). For these researchers, authenticity can be a subjective feeling that is constructed by tourists. For instance, Molz (2004) stated that authenticity "primarily exists in the modern mindset of the Western tourist" (p. 61). MacCannell's view of authenticity provides an essential stepping-stone to better understanding the true nature of the concept. However, the work of Molz and others expand on MacCannell's views and provide a more in-depth understanding of the concept of authenticity.

Regardless of the limitations of MacCannell's view of authenticity many researchers have extended the studies of authenticity. Wang (1999) thoroughly reviews authenticity literature and concludes that tourism studies tend to approach authenticity through three theoretical lenses: objective, constructive, and postmodern. He elaborates that tourism research that takes the objectivism perspective focus on the authenticity in the toured objects. This approach is the closest to the original definition of authenticity in museums, which means there are objective measurements of whether the toured objects are authentic or not. As such, tourists' feelings of authenticity are disregarded. This approach is referred to as objective authenticity.

On the contrary to objective authenticity, Wang (1999) explains studies that take the constructivism approach that focuses on the tourist experiences. This approach maintains that authenticity is interpreted and constructed by people's mental activity. As such, even if tourists' experienced what MacCannell (1976) claims to be staged authenticity, it still can be recognized as authentic experience because authenticity is constructed in terms of perspective, beliefs, and expectations. This approach is referred to as constructive authenticity.

In addition, Wang (1999) summarizes the last categorization of authenticity studies that take postmodernism approaches. According to Wang, these researchers disregard inauthenticity as an issue. For example, Disneyland is a merely a production of fantasy and imagination. Therefore, authenticity is irrelevant since there is no original to refer back (Eco, 1986). Furthermore, postmodernism researchers argue that modern technology is able to create things that are more genuine and easy to access than the

original. As such, these researchers direct their attention to the enjoyment experience of tourists.

Different from objectivism, constructivism, and post-modernism of authenticity, which focus on whether and how the toured objects are creating authentic experience for tourists, Wang proposed a new approach: existential authenticity. Existential authenticity concentrates on the “existential experience (which) involves personal or inter-subjective feelings activated by the liminal process of tourist activities” (Wang, 1999, p. 351). For example, tourists participating in the New Orleans Mardi Gras parades can be an existential authentic experience comparing to being a spectator only. According to Wang, this approach is targeted at the state of Being that is rooted in tourist activities. As such, authenticity is achieved in participating actively in non-ordinary activities from one’s daily life.

Wang further divided existential authenticity into two categories: intra-personal and inter-personal authenticity. On the one hand, intra-personal authenticity emphasizes a bodily state of Being, such as the sensual pleasures, feelings from a beach holiday. The intra-personal authentic experience is also related to tourists “self-making” or “self-achievement”. On the other hand, inter-personal authenticity addresses the social relationships with family, friends, other travelers, which creates “authentic, natural and emotional bonds” (Wang, 1999, p. 364). Wang’s (1999) suggests that existential authenticity is gained through the process of touristic activities. Couch surfing is a highly activity centered practice. Thus, this study attempts to examine whether Wang’s existential authenticity theory can be applied to travel practices. Additionally, Dann (2002) argues that the majority of authenticity studies was conducted for mass tourism

before the personal computer, the Internet, blogs, and mobile phones' popularity and may not apply to today's prevalent generation. Thus, this empirical research seeks to answer the question whether authenticity theory can be applied to individualized travel in a world where Internet and mobile devices are prevalent in daily life. In particular couch surfers' experience as an example of travelers' experience via SNSs are explored.

2.2 Methods

Semi-structured interview methodology is utilized to generate rich information in order to understand couch surfers' experiences. Interview is a process to discover what others think and feel about particular issues (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In other words, interview is a process in which the researchers try to create a conversation with the participants for the purpose of understanding the deeper meaning of a phenomenon, especially to understand the phenomenon from the perspective and experience of the participants (Kvale, 2007). The purpose of this study is to understand couch surfers' traveling experiences and how they think and feel about their experience using social networking sites. Utilizing interviews should generate rich information to gain insight of couch surfers' experiences and the perceptions of their experiences.

Semi-structured interview is more or less inquiring participants' experiences with the guidance of open-ended questions (Flick, 1998). Semi-structured interview was selected for this study is for its concentration on the research questions with the flexibility and flow of a conversation. The researcher was able to address the major research questions in the conversation. Meanwhile, the flow and flexibility of the conversation granted participants the chance of freely express their perspectives freely, thus generating

rich information. Additionally, semi-structured interview allows the researcher to follow up with questions to clarify and confirm participants meaning.

Fifteen couch surfers from 5 different countries were interviewed either in person or via Skype for this case study. Each interview lasted about one hour. All the interviews are recorded and transcribed word for word. Additionally, journalistic field notes of interviewees' gestures and tones during the interview were recorded. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol and open-ended questions (Appendix A). The interview protocol mainly addressed greetings, consents for recording, agreement to follow up and comments thanking the participants. The guiding questions were developed to discuss the process of couch surfing and couch surfers' experiences in each step of this process. Guiding interview questions were refined after a pilot testing with a couch surfer. The pilot test data was not used in this study.

2.2.1 Participants

This study focused on experienced couch surfers' experiences under the assumption that couch surfers who have participated in more surfing, hosting and events would have more insights about their own and other couch surfers' experience.

Experienced couch surfers are selected by three criteria: detailed profile information, recent login time, and large reference number. First, the selected couch surfer must have a profile that is rich with details. Among couch surfers, the "seasoned" members usually have a detailed profile that portrays who they are, while new members, referred to as "newbies," tend to have an empty profile with little information for others to judge who they are. A detailed profile also assists the researcher to gain a background idea of who the interviewees are, which then serves as the context of the interview. Second,

CouchSurfing keeps and publically posts a record of every member's last login time, which indicates how active a person is on CouchSurfing. For example, if a member has not logged in to their account since June 1st, 2012, it means this person is mostly likely has neither surfed nor hosted via CouchSurfing. In other words, this person is not very active in CouchSurfing for the past year. To secure a higher respond rate, only couch surfers who had logged in within 2 weeks by the time of participants selection were included in the study.

Lastly, a couch surfer's reference number is a strong indicator of the experience level of a couch surfer. Reference number on CouchSurfing refers to comments couch surfers leave for other couch surfers after their encounter. The reference usually describes where they meet, how they feel about the meeting, and their experience with each other. It serves as a review system similar to Amazon consumer review. The more positive review an Amazon product has, the more likely others will buy it compare to a same product with lower reviews. Similarly, the more positive references a couch surfer has, the more likely others would send him/her a request since a couch surfer can mainly obtain references after encountering other couch surfers. The more a person has participated in couch surfing activities (i.e., surfing), the more references he/she would have, and the more likely this person is a very experienced couch surfer. In an effort to ensure participants had a rich history of couch surfing. Thus the researchers only invited surfers with more than 100 references to participate in this study.

With the guidance of the three criteria above, a total of 40 couch surfers in five different countries were contacted between March 4th and 8th, 2013. Interviews were then arranged with the 15 people who responded. The interviews took place both in

person and via Skype between March 12th and May 15th, 2013. Three people are interviewed face-to-face and the other twelve via Skype because of their location and time availability. In all, this study interviewed 15 experienced couch surfers from five different countries, Canada (n=1), Germany (n=4), Italy (n=2), New Zealand (n=2), and United States (n=6). Participants included 6 (40%) females and 9 (60%) males. The average age is 39.7 (SD=12.3, Max=62, Min=19). The participants have been a couch surfer for 1859 days, roughly 5 years (Max=2527 days, Min=820 days). The average number of references on participants CouchSurfing profile is 166 (Max=305, Min=135).

2.2.2 Data Analysis Procedures

Data analyses consisted of two phases: the daily interpretive analysis as suggested by Wood (2000) and grounded theory analysis as guided by Charmaz' (2006) book *Constructing Grounded Theory*. For daily interpretive analysis, reflections of the interview were recorded and preliminary interpretation immediately after each interview. This allowed a fresh insight of the interview to be written down, thus decreasing the threat of forgetting important reflections and information over time (Wood, 2000). Another benefit of the immediate interpretive analysis is that it affords the opportunity for follow up with interviewees for clarification and confirmation. After all the interviews were completed and transcribed, member checking was incorporated to ensure accurate transcription and interpretation of their verbal and non-verbal intent during the interview. A final data analysis consisted of coding the data and categorizing in to themes in order to understand couch surfers' authentic experience from an existential perspective.

Grounded theory is a systematic guideline for qualitative data collection and analysis that allows research to construct theories rooted in the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Two major stages of grounded theory coding include: initial coding and focused coding. The initial coding involves “naming each word, line, or segment of data” followed by “a focused, selective, phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). As Charmaz suggests, data analysis consisted of a close reading of the interview transcription, notes of interviewees’ gestures and tones during the interview, and the notes from immediate interpretive analysis for emerging pattern and categories of information. Then the data were organized into major categories and themes.

After data analysis was completed, the validity of analysis was performed using multiple coders and member checking. The additional coders assisted with transcribing and coding of the data into themes. The coders submitted a list of themes that they believed were the most prominent, which were compared with the themes and patterns previously identified. Then the new themes were rechecked and re-categorized. A recheck with the participants also was conducted to determine if the interpretations of the themes and patterns were consistent with their intended meanings.

2.3 Results

Participants were interviewed to explore their experiences when couch surfing. More specifically this study sought to gain a better understand of surfer’s experiences prior to location visitation, after they arrive and when they leave. Participants’ experiences were first asked in details such as everyday activities and feelings. The researchers hope to gain participants’ insights first without influencing their perceptions. Then towards the end of the interviews, the participants were directly asked if they had authentic experience couch surfing. This arrangement is to get direct answers of the

couch surfers' experiences in addition to the indirect evidence gained from earlier questions. Most participants requested further clarification of authenticity, which was explained by the combined definition of Theobald (1998) and Hillman (2007): authenticity is the genuine, unadulterated experience which allows a traveler to sample the real culture of the host society and the host people. The participants who didn't ask the definition of authenticity were provided the definition after their answer to whether they obtained authenticity. In all three stages, participants felt strongly that the surfing experience they had was authentic. In addition to participant's answers about their authentic experience, they also illustrated many different factors that contributed to their experiences, which can be categorized into three major themes: preparations, connections, and time. The following section explains how these themes cultivated couch surfers' experiences, followed by discussions of how these experiences are related to authenticity regarding to MacCannell's (1976).

2.3.1 Preparation Makes Perfect

The initial stage of couch surfing is before a couch surfer actually meets his/her host. Participants affirmed that this preparation stage is vital to whether they are going to have an authentic experience or not. At this stage, information is the key to the preparation of a trip. This information can be put into two categories: 1) search for a potential host with whom they want to stay with, as opposed to anybody that offers a free place; and 2) search for tips in the CouchSurfing online group discussion board about local specials, including events, activities, food, interesting places, etc. Couch surfers often raise questions in the discussion board about certain information that cannot be found in any guide books.

“Finding the perfect host is no easy work, just like it’s not easy to find your soul mate,” one participant humored. The search process often starts with a basic filtration to narrow down the pool of hosts in a particular destination. The CouchSurfing website provides filters include age, gender, keyword, language, last login time, availability for kids, pets and smoking, etc. Most interviewees mentioned they would narrow down the results first by using different filters. Then surfers would then read the most appealing hosts profiles before deciding who to send a request to. Most participants start with someone who they share some common interests, which confirms what Rosen et al (2011) described how SNSs is used between people who share similar interests. After selecting a few potential hosts, a couch surfer would write an individualized couch request to explain why he/she wants to surf with a particular host based on the host’s profile information.

In addition to searching for people with whom surfers share common interests, participants also mentioned they would also send requests to people who have some “surprising qualities.” The “surprising quality” criteria vary from person to person, yet they share the same attractiveness to the participants in this study. One American interviewee articulated passionately:

I expect a surprise usually. There are a lot of things relative or they don’t mean anything. For example, most people in their profiles write ‘I’m adventurous’, that’s one phrase that means absolutely nothing because maybe you consider yourself adventurous and in my opinion I may agree with you oh she is super cool and does crazy shit, or I may think that you are totally boring. So I am always looking for someone who can really amaze me. I am looking to find what it is in

this person that will amaze me. And if you pay attention, usually you will find something that is really cool about them. [S01]

Other participants have expressed similar feelings towards the process by which they find hosts. Interestingly, they added that if they found these “surprising qualities”, they would even send out requests to hosts who have few, or even no references. These surfers explained that sometimes the surfing decision is guided by “gut feelings” or “sixth sense” after they have been couch surfer for a long period of time. Participants stated that “it takes a leap of faith” in their hosts and faith in themselves in being prepared for any situation. Previous research assert that couch surfers tend to stay with people who have more references which is in turn used as a criteria to judge the trustworthiness of a couch surfer (Rosen et al, 2011). However, this investigation found experienced couch surfers are more interested in others who have qualities that are considered “odd”, “quirky” or even “crazy” by the mainstream, regardless of how many references a host may have. For example, one German participant’s explanation of this “odd” quality:

Like this guy who made his job to drive taxis for old and disabled people, state funded taxi service, just so he can listen to his pop music all day. (He) drive(s) people around during the day, and then goes to micro-concerts at night. [S08]

Additionally, several participants expressed that couch surfing is hard work, part of which comes from the preparation process. Instead of simply paying for a hotel or hostel room, knowing for sure that one will have a place to stay upon arrival, hunting down a “perfect” host takes a lot of effort. There is an amount of effort required to spend

time reading hosts' profiles and sending requests. This process also takes skills to recognize the components for a potential authentic experience simply from reading a host's profile and corresponding with a host. Once accepted by a host, a surfer will then need to keep communicating along the way to the experience. However, participants mentioned that this preparation process increased the chances of having a good time when they arrive. The Canadian couch surfer explicitly explained:

It takes time to find an interesting host, but almost always it is those times I got lazy or got rushed to pick a host without putting in any work when I didn't enjoy my stay. So in the end it pays back if a good experience is what you are looking for. [S14]

Besides the potential of a good experience upon arrival, participants also explained that this searching process helps them become more familiar with the location and the people they will meet. In this sense, couch surfers are gaining destination information from the locals directly. By locals, participants explained that it does not have to be strictly limited to native residents of a place. Locals may also include outsiders who have been a resident for such an extended period of time that they are familiar with the place. This information is normally not accessible from guide books or marketing website. Several participants mentioned that if they are staying in a hotel because of work or simply because no host was available, they would still send out messages to the local group to gather information about places to go and tips on restaurants etc. Based on this data, it can be deduced that CouchSurfing, as a SNS, provides information that potentially leads to authentic experience.

Additionally, couch surfers are building initial bonds with their hosts by getting to know their hosts from reading their profiles and exchange messages. As one Italian couch surfer articulated, “by the time you meet your host, you don’t feel like you are meeting a stranger, it feels like you are meeting a friend” [S07]. Another American participant said warmly, “there are no strangers, they are just friends you haven’t met yet. I feel better thinking this way and my heart is warmer going to a new place to stay with new friends” [S13]. In other words, gaining information from the locals through SNSs and building initial bonds with future hosts both contributed to the potential of an authentic experience before a couch surfer arrives at a place.

2.3.2 Connections: Place verses People

After the initial agreement is made online, the next stage begins when a couch surfer meets his/her host offline. The initial encounter sometimes starts with small talks and pleasantries. Sometimes it begins with a tour of the house, such as, where the surfer would stay, and how things work in the host’s house. Sometimes the initial meeting can go straight to activities such as having a drink or join other couch surfers for meals. There are also extremes as when one American couch surfer [S01] invited his host for a motorbike ride immediately after they exchanged names and greetings. Then various activities are followed by the initial rapport. The activities could include talking about their common interest, sharing travel stories, sharing meals, going bowling, going to a local event, or any other special activities. The data from this investigation sheds light on how participants gain existential authenticity through couch surfing.

First, authenticity is reflected in where one stays while traveling. MacCannell (1976) explained that most tourists do not have the access to the backstage where the

locals live their life, thus not gaining authenticity. All the participants addressed that most of the times they feel they had authentic experience by staying in a local host's place. As one of the New Zealand couch surfers explains:

The whole feeling of actually being in somebody's home and what that means is that you are in a place somebody lives. When you are couch surfiang, you are actually a guest in somebody's primary living space, and it gives so much more character, it's that person's life, manifested in their living environment. It can't be more real than that. [S09]

By staying in the backstage, couch surfers get to experience authenticity that is presented in details of daily life. For example, common sense of how a house should function varies from person to person. However, this common sense can carry some cultural characteristics. Most interviewees addressed the importance of getting to know how the host runs the house at the early stage of their meeting. First, it helps to build rapport in person. Additionally, it helps in avoiding doing something that is rude at either the personal or local custom level. More importantly, sometimes it reveals a tip of the iceberg tip of local culture. For instance, one German participant [S05] relayed how she learned that the first thing you do when you enter someone's place is to take off your shoes in Poland and most of East Europe. But it is a concept that is completely unknown in her culture, because they never have carpets and always wear shoes inside their house. Another example is how an American couch surfer became aware of saving energy in an Italian host's house. She articulated that it had never occurred to her that she could have saved energy and being comfortable at the same time by putting on an extra sweater with

a room temperature of 70 degrees Fahrenheit inside the house during winter times rather than wearing short sleeves and adjusting the heater to 80 degrees. Things as tiny as whether to take your shoes off or turn the heater down a few degrees give couch surfers a sense of authenticity because these things usually do not happen in a typical stay at a hotel. After all, tourists who stay in a hotel do not get to experience the local custom of entering one's house, nor the subtle, customary polite details. Thus, missing a chance to take a peek of local's life in their most authentic state.

In addition to the customs of the home's operation in the backstage, authenticity also comes from couch surfers' connections to local people, who would grant surfers access to things that are not accessible to mainstream tourists. For example, one participant's host took her to the election place of Argentina's very first presidential election. She spent the whole day watching Argentinians vote and in the end was allowed to count the votes as the back-up counts because of her host works in a ministry in charge of counting votes. Another participant's host in Maine took her out lobster fishing and she captured the very first lobster in her life and cooked it freshly without having to pay any money, while a typical tourist would have to pay a sizable amount for this experience. There are ample additional examples which illustrate the kind of authentic experiences couch surfers get through their connections with the locals. Another German interviewee provided an interesting metaphor: "your hosts open doors for you that you would either not be able to open up or you wouldn't even know they are there" [S04].

Besides these apparent components that contribute to couch surfers' authentic experience, one other important component emerged from the data. Participants expressed the connections they build with a place through the local people is more

profound than a place they just visit without knowing anybody there. As one German participant briefly mentioned, “couch surfers are generally just curious about new connections, to people in their city or people from far away” [S08]. Participants expressed their feelings toward a place often alters after they stay with their hosts. They felt they are closer to a place after they have met the people who live there. The place is not simple a tour destination they have been to and did sightseeing. It became a place where their friends’ lives. Another participant’s words best captured this intimacy to a place via its people:

When most people think about their experiences, they don’t think about ‘oh, Rome was cool and the places I saw were cool,’ but they think ‘oh, my host was cool because he showed me bla bla bla. Rome is not only Rome any more, it’s also where my friend lives. I feel I’m closer and care more about Rome because of my connection with my host. [S04]

In sum, this pattern of connection mainly manifested itself in two ways. First, couch surfers gain access to the backstage of a place through their connections with its people. Thus, the connection with locals gives them opportunity to sample the real culture of host society during their travel. Second, the connection to a place seems to be stronger for couch surfers through the bond with their hosts. Thus, couch surfers obtain a sample of real culture of the host people.

2.3.3 Time: Rome wasn't built in a day

Most of the participants expressed that they prefer to spend more time at one place rather than going to multiple places in the equal amount of time in order to gain a

deeper understanding of a place. They explained that it takes time to soak in the nuances of culture. Additionally, couch surfers prefer to spend quality time with hosts' to create memorable experiences. Participants also articulated the desire of to build familiarity with a place over time, e.g.: directions from place to place, street names, and neighborhood sceneries. One New Zealand participant said "Rome wasn't built in a day, how can you expect to see all its real beauty in 3 days" [S09]? In other words, spending longer time at a place and interact with its culture and people tends to give couch surfers a sense of authenticity to the place they visit.

Besides spending extensive time at a place, participants maintained that their time is usually adjusted according to their host's schedule. For instance, they spend time during the day by themselves if their hosts work during the day, which is very often the case. Then they come back to cook dinner with their hosts or go out for a meal and drinks. Most participants clearly stated that they are not comfortable coming back to their hosts' place after late-night parties, unless their hosts are with them. One Italian interviewee clearly stated that:

They (tourists) come in a group, they have a plan, they have a casual thing to do, they can speak their own languages to each other. They want experience as well, but mostly to see, to site seeing of places is more important. A tourist that come and being with tour, is expecting to follow his own reason, while a couch surfer is supposed to adjust to situations, respect the host's time, being flexible with schedules. It's not like in 100% the cases, but I think that's the difference. [S07]

This politeness and awareness of time and the respect of the host's time seems to be the common practice of experienced couch surfers.

In sum, couch surfers are gaining authentic experiences in the sense of MacCannell's definition of authenticity in the backstage of a toured place. These authentic experiences seem to be achieved by abundant preparation pre-traveling, connection with a place through its people, and spending longer time at one place. These results offer insight for explanation and prediction of general travelers' experience using social networking sites.

2.4 Existential Authenticity

Wang (1999) has discussed previous research of authenticity extensively from the three major trends: objective authenticity, constructive authenticity, post-modernistic authenticity. Based on previous research, he explored authenticity in an existential perspective, which is achieved by participating activities that are not from one's routine life (Wang, 1999). Existential authenticity includes intra-personal authenticity and interpersonal authenticity. Intra-personal authenticity refers to the "bodily feelings" and "self-achievement" gained from traveling. Interpersonal authenticity discusses the "family ties" and "touristic communitas." The following section discusses whether the existential perspective of authenticity can be applied to couch surfers' experiences. If so, how? If not, why?

2.4.1 Bodily Feelings

Wang (1999) explains that "bodily feelings" are one dimension of intra-personal authenticity. He addressed that the body is "relaxed and not limited by bodily control or self-control imposed by social structures or the superego". On the one hand, couch

surfers are constrained by the host's rules. Many participants mentioned that they would follow their hosts' house rules of behavior and manners. These are somewhat similar to the social structure one would experience in their own habitat. Their superego is monitoring them to be a respectful guest, and not to be too gratified with their bodily sensual pleasure. Especially when sleeping on a couch, sometimes even on the floor, the comfort, sensual pleasure as Wang explains it, is hard to guarantee. Thus, couch surfers' authentic experience is less likely from sensual pleasure of intra-personal authenticity.

However, despite the bodily inconvenience, sleeping on a stranger's "couch" is certainly not cohesive with the social norm of "do not talk to a stranger" rule. This can bring an exotic feeling even when the body is constrained with similar social structures. For example, one American couch surfer [S05] vividly illustrated that her daily routine at home would involve leaving the air conditioner at a low temperature in the summer, taking long hot showers, leaving the light on even in the room she is not using, and sleep on her own big comfortable bed. However, when she surfs, she has become aware of how her hosts from other countries are very energy efficient and incorporate saving energy into their daily life. Quoting from her proud claim "physically I may be suffering from the things I'm not used to, but for some reason it also feels very good too." Meanwhile, several participants mentioned that they love dancing. They tend to stay with hosts who also love dancing. One German surfer enthusiastically burst "I dance, I sweat, I laugh, I love it. Maybe I could have spent the night go to the world trade center, but going dancing with my host made me happier!" Wang (1999) explains that "the body alters its routine existence and enters an alternative, yet intensified experiential state, recreation, diversion, entertainment, spontaneity, playfulness, or in short, authenticity in the

existential sense” (p. 361). In this sense, some participants of this study have experienced intra-personal authenticity to a small degree.

2.4.2 Self Making

Wang (1999) explained that many people were constrained by their everyday work and routine life that they encounter difficulty in pursuing self-realization. The adventure off the beaten track gives travelers a sense of alternative trial of self. In the case of couch surfers, the self-achievement sense can be rooted in successfully building connections with other couch surfers. For example, a German participant articulated:

I guess for me, it’s a challenge of communication and you essentially have this one shot email, which might be 5, 10, 20 lines of text to convince strangers to let you stay right next to them in their home. I guess I get a lot of satisfaction out of actually scoring a couch, by knowing that, I just created a new deep human connection with a short message, that’s a very good feeling for me. [S08]

This sense of self-achievement through adventure off beaten track fits in the couch surfing system perfectly when surfers experience things that are normally inaccessible for outsiders through their connections with local hosts. This is not to assert that couch surfers do not go sightseeing at all. Most participants do go sightseeing or do “touristic stuff” as they call it. Most of couch surfers would go to well-known places during the day while their hosts were working so that they can “check it off the bucket list”. However, the importance of sightseeing is far less compared to having an adventure that is attended mainly by locals. Experienced couch surfers tend to participate in activities which allow them to observe or experience local life and culture, and achieve

intra-personal authenticity subsequently. In this sense, Wang's (1999) intra-personal authenticity is reflected in the couch surfers' experience of self-making and self-achieving.

2. 4. 3 Friendship Ties

In addition to the pursuit for intra-personal authenticity, travelers also seek inter-personal authenticity in their traveling. Inter-personal authenticity addresses the social relationships with family, friends, other travelers, which creates an "authentic, natural and emotional bond" that Wang (1999) further divided into "family ties" and "touristic communitas". Originally, Wang stated that family ties allow individuals to express their "true selves" while enjoy seeing sights and going to events. People experience strong "authentic, natural and emotional bonds" while traveling with family. At a first glance, this dimension of interpersonal authenticity does not apply to couch surfing except that couch surfers do enjoy seeing sights and going to events with their hosts. However, participants conveyed that there is no need to carry the rigid social identity that a person generally presents to co-workers and social acquaintances in a place where no one knows who he or she is. Additionally, previous research has found that couch surfers share an intense emotional bond during a short period of time (Bialski, 2007; Molz, 2011). As such, the emotional connections couch surfers feel with their hosts tends to allow surfers to express their true self. It seems very likely that the friendship ties couch surfers experienced is inclined to mirror the authenticity tourists have from their family ties. Thus, questing for friendship ties indicate that couch surfers gain a sense similar to Wang's (1999) family ties of inter-personal authenticity through their experience.

2. 4. 4 Touristic Communities

“Communitas” originally referred to the “pure” relationship pilgrims have when making their journey (Turner, 1973). Pilgrims relate to each other as social equals and their relationship is “unmediated” with strong emotions and religious values (Wang, 1999). According to Turner, tourists have similar experience in relation to each other while they are traveling. Rosen et al (2011) stated that there is a strong sense of belonging and trust among couch surfers, which resembles Turner’s notion of strong emotional ties. After all, these are strangers out of their normal social constraints and on a purely volunteer basis with no “disharmonies or conflict” (Turner, 1973, p. 221), and thus generate a “pure” relationship. Additionally, each couch surfer’s destination may be different, but their encounter seems to share the same sense of community and a common value. For example, all the participants seem to share a set of common sense within the CouchSurfing system (i.e.: spending time and effort to make initial contact, checking for house rules, respecting hosts’ time, etc.). After all, as one participant conveyed, no Facebook users call themselves “Facebookers,” but members of CouchSurfing identify with the community and each other so much that they call themselves couch surfers. Couch surfers may not have as sacred a value system as pilgrims do, but they do share similar emotional bonds and a sense of community that are similar to the pilgrims’ communitas. Even this touristic community seems to be different from Wang’s (1999) religious communitas on the surface, they both resemble each other in several ways as discussed. Future studies should explore the similarity and differences more in-depth.

However, it should be noted that not all the couch surfers travel as experienced couch surfers do. Participants of this study expressed their concerns that now more

“newbies” are joining CouchSurfing without a clue of the community values and common sense. These new members became members with the mindset that CouchSurfing is just a social networking site that provides free place to stay. They have not learned to prepare for a trip in way that can build connections with a place through its people over time, and are likely to not gain a deeper experience from a place. An Italian participant frowned and expressed in a frustrated tone:

Well, first of all, couch surfing is, from my point of view, is an occasion to get to know other people, to exchange views with other people, to hear about their lives, and their community and to tell them if they want to know about my life and my community, obviously that doesn't take place in a hotel. It's the human contact which as far as I'm concerned, is the first value, the first quality of couch surfing. It's the people you meet and what you learn about them and vice versa. It doesn't happen frequently, but I have met couch surfers who do talk about themselves and what they are doing and what they are seeing and maybe about their country. But, surprisingly enough, they're visiting Italy they don't ask me anything about Italy, I don't force information on people, I wait for them to ask, to show an interest, to show curiosity. I couch surf because I'm curious about other people in another culture. I find many people who come here are not curious. They come and they take a tour around Florence and take some photos, and go away and they never really ask me anything about Italy or the Italian culture. I have had several Korean visitors. A couple of them said how much they missed Korean food. I'm sure Korean food is good, but I said, you are in Italy, aren't you tasting Italian food? "Oh, well, yes, I had some pizza," but they are not curious. For me, traveling, the

first thing I do is taste the cuisine in any country. These girls come and they day dream about going back to Korea, and what their mother will serve them in the morning. Then what's the point of becoming a couch surfer or even travel? [S05]

Some couch surfers think this cultural change of CouchSurfing is because the media's misleading advertising tends to focus on the free stay part without explaining the deeper meaning and significance of couch surfing. It has been suggested by the participants that the reason for this is because the cooperation structure changed from none-profit to for-profit and that the company goal shifted from building quality communities to increasing membership numbers. Future studies should explore less experienced couch surfers' experience and their perspective in comparison to experienced couch surfers. Additionally, the concerns of organizational change from the participants need to be addressed more in-depth in the future studies.

CONCLUSION

The present investigation explored couch surfers' experience as an example of SNSs users' experiences in travel in an attempt to fill in the paucity of research regarding authenticity in the era of SNSs popularity. MacCannell's (1976) traditional perspective of authenticity and Wang's (1999) existential perspective of authenticity were used to understand couch surfers' experience in depth. The results indicated three major themes that couch surfers gain authenticity from MacCannell's (1976) backstage: preparation before the trip, connection to a place via the host, and extensive time spent at a place. The preparation of the trip assisted obtaining information from the locals and building initial bond between surfers and hosts. Connections to a place were created both through the

accessibility local people granted couch surfers and through the motional bond with the people who live there. Time was considered to be an important factor to gain authentic experience and to construct familiarity with a place and its people and culture.

Existential perspective of authenticity addressed intra-personal and inter-personal authenticity (Wang, 1999). The result of this study implied that most couch surfers' experience reveals resemblance to the existential authenticity theory. Couch surfers build a sense of self-achievement and bodily feelings to a degree in intra-personal authenticity. Meanwhile, couch surfers' connections to their hosts seem to cultivate experiences that are similar to interpersonal authenticity in the sense of both friendship ties and touristic communities. In sum, this study reveals that couch surfing as a social networking site creates opportunities for existential authenticity to a degree.

This study offers insights of travelers' authentic experience via social networking sites using CouchSurfing as an example. There are several limitations of this study. First, due to the journal length requirement and richness of the interview data, this article could only address surfers' experiences. However, the researchers plan to further discuss host's experience and perspectives in the next study. Second, this study invited only experienced couch surfers as interview participants in searching for a deeper understanding of couch surfers' experience. However, it seems that the newer members of CouchSurfing are not sharing the same values or travel practices from the participants' comments. Future studies should consider inclusion of couch surfers with few times of surfing and hosting experience in order to learn their insights about couch surfing in comparison to experienced couch surfers. Finally, while this study explored couch surfers

experience from five different countries, they were predominantly Western countries.

Future studies should consider involving participants from none-Western countries.

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APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How did you start couch surfing?
2. How is couch surfing different from staying in a hotel or hostel?
3. How do you decide who to host?
4. What information on their profile that you pay more attention to?
5. How do you decide who to surf with?
6. What do you usually expect from your surfers? Hosts? Before you meet them.
7. When you first meet your host/surfer, how do you build rapport?
8. What do you do with your host/surfer when you stay with them?
9. Tell me something about your hosting/surfing experiences
10. What are some memorable couch surfing experiences for you? Can you give me a few examples?
11. Do you have authentic experience of the places you visit? What does couch surfing have to do with this authentic experience?
12. Do you think the couch surfers you hosted are getting authentic experiences?
13. Have you had any negative couch surfing experience? If yes, could you tell me about them?
14. Do you keep in touch with your hosts? If yes, how?
15. Do you leave a reference for your host? If yes, how? If not, why?

**CHAPTER FOUR: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF ONLINE TRAVELERS'
REVIEWS: COUCH SURFERS' AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE MANIFESTED IN
REFERENCES³**

³ To be submitted to Annals of Tourism Research.

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have identified online consumer-generated reviews as a significant factor that impact consumers' behaviors (e.g.: Zhu & Zhang, 2010; Cui, Lui, & Guo, 2012; Bruce, Foutz, & Kolsarici, 2012). In tourism, researchers have noticed that these online reviews have crucial influences on travelers' information search and sharing (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008a; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Ip, Lee & Law, 2012). Meanwhile, studies have found that the majority literature of online consumer-generated reviews between 2000 and 2010 emphasized discussion forums or rating sites from an e-commerce perspective. Little attention has been paid to other forms of electronic word-of-mouth in academic research (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). One example of "other forms" could be reviews from none-commercialized social networking sites.

Social networking sites (SNSs) are the "virtual communities where users can create individual public profiles, interact with real-life friends, and meet other people based on shared interests" (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). SNS is not just a static web page, but often serves as a platform for users to generate content and tell stories about their own experiences (Miguens, Baggio & Costa, 2008). For example, one of the travel oriented SNSs, CouchSurfing, provides the online network for members (known as couch surfers) to find other members to stay with for free while traveling. After the encounter, these couch surfers would use CouchSurfing's review system (known as reference) to comment on their experience. Between January 2004 and January 2013, the number of CouchSurfing members around the world grew from just over 6,000 to more than 5,500,000 (CouchSurfing, 2013). During this time, enormous amount of references were generated among couch surfers. Studying CouchSurfing references would add to the

“other forms” of none-commercial online consumer-generated reviews called for by Cheung and Thadani (2012).

A reference on CouchSurfing is the online reviews “members write on each other’s profile describing their experiences with one another” (CouchSurfing, 2013). Previous studies have explored why travelers leave these reviews (Yoo, & Gretzel, 2008b) and how other travelers utilize these reviews (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007; Adamic, Lauterbach, Teng, & Ackerman, 2011). Yet, it is not very clear what kind of experiences were expressed in the content of these references. Researchers have acknowledged that analyzing the content of online reviews may reveal travelers’ experiences in a more genuine and representative way (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008, p.105). As such, the purpose of this study is to explore the content of couch surfers’ user generated reviews, often referred to as references, to gain insight into travelers’ experiences manifested by their own words.

According to Molz (2011) and Rosen, Lafontaine and Hendrickson (2011), couch surfers gain authentic experience while traveling. The conclusion produced by this study is that staying at locals’ home and getting in close contact with local people granted couch surfers the opportunity and access to go beyond the front stage (MacCannell, 1976) and experience the true backstage life and culture of a place, and thus achieve authenticity. Authenticity is a term tourism studies use to explore traveler and tourists motivation (MacCannell, 1976). Numerous studies have been done since MacCannell (1973) introduced the term into tourism studies. Wang (1999) did an extensive literature review of authenticity theories since the work of MacCannell in 1976 and developed the frame work of existential authenticity and categories of existential authenticity. In this

study, the focus is on exploring couch surfers' experiences manifested in the references. Particularly, what kind of experiences are revealed in online traveler-generated reviews?

WHAT ARE TRAVELERS SAYING ONLINE ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE?

2.1 Research Background

This study explores travelers experience from the perspective of existential authenticity using travelers' own expressions through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Specifically, CouchSurfing is used as a case study. Case study is an exploratory analysis of one sample of the entire population, may the population be a person, a group, or an event (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Thomas (2011) further explains, a case study is a useful method to provide analytical frame for a general population through representative samples (Thomas, 2011). Thus, a case study approach allows this research to dissect one example of SNS affording the opportunity to gather in-depth data; yielding a more comprehensive picture of couch surfer authentic experiences. More specifically, the CouchSurfing website was selected for this case study because of its large membership and is one of the largest SNSs among couch surfers today. The following illustrates what authenticity, existential authenticity and eWOM are, how they are applied to this case study, as well as to the significance of this study.

2.1.1 Existential Authenticity

Authenticity has been studied in numerous ways since MacCannell (1976) introduced the term into tourism studies. Tourism studies tend to approach authenticity in three major ways: objectivism, constructivism and existentialism (Wang, 1999). A group of studies focused on the objectivity of authenticity (Boorstin, 1964; Taylor, 2001). In these studies, researchers regard authenticity as "a real property of toured objects that can

be measured against absolute and objective criteria” (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006, p.68). Contrary to objectivistic perspective of authenticity, a second set of studies focused on the subjective experience of tourists (Cohen, 1988; Spooner 1986; Bruner, 1994; Taylor, 2001), which is known as constructive authenticity. Researchers then proposed that constructive authenticity is constructed by tourists and their interactions with hosts’ culture (Adams, 1996). After studying literature in both objective and constructive authenticity, Wang (1999) proposed a third theme: existential authenticity.

Compared to objective authenticity’s focus on toured objects and constructive authenticity’s attention to subjective experience created by tourists, existential authenticity addresses “existential experience (as it) involves personal or inter-subjective feelings activated by the liminal process of tourist activities” (Wang, 1999, p. 351). Existential authenticity pays more attention to the state of Being that is embedded in tourists’ participation in activities. According to Wang (1999), there are two forms of existential authenticity: intra-personal authenticity and inter-personal authenticity. Intra-personal authenticity concentrates on the bodily feelings and sensual pleasures, as well as self-making outside one’s ordinary environment. Inter-personal authenticity stresses the tourists’ emotional bonds with their family and religious communitas.

In addition to modeling authenticity into three categories and explaining the concept of each type of authenticity, Wang (1999) also suggests further exploration of existential authenticity empirically to better understand tourists. There are many ways to explore authenticity. Dann (2002) argues that most of authenticity research was before the age of technology popularity of Internet, blogs, social networking sites and smart phones. More studies are needed to explore authenticity in today’s Internet prevalent

generation. As such, this study particularly explores how existential authenticity is expressed in user-generated reviews on social networking sites, also known as electronic word of mouth.

2.1.2 Word of Mouth (WOM) and Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)

The fast development of Internet has largely facilitated interpersonal communication (Huang, Yang, Lin & Shih, 2012). Before the Internet, people may have made purchase decisions according to friends and family recommendations (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). With the assistance of the Internet, people tend to rely on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) when making purchasing decisions (Jalivand, & Samiei, 2012). Similarly, when not paying for a hotel, people tended to stay with relatives or friends for free while traveling. Today, they have the option of staying with strangers for free or for very little money via social networking sites (SNSs) such as CouchSurfing, Hospitality Club, and Airbnb. eWOM has played a vital role when selecting with whom to stay (Gretzel et al., 2007; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007). More in-depth examination of the content of eWOM would provide a better understanding of the importance of the role it plays in decision-making.

Word of Mouth (WOM) is the “informal communication directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and series and/or their sellers” (Westbrook, 1987, p.261). For example, people often tell their friends and family about their experience of a new restaurant in town. Similarly to WOM, eWOM is defined as “all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers” (Latvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). Different from traditional

WOM, eWOM possess several unique characteristics (Lee, 2009). For example, eWOM shares information on a large scale and fast speed of diffusion comparing to sharing information with a small group of people. In addition to the scale and speed, eWOM does not require all the information receivers to be present at the same time. Furthermore, eWOM has a clearer measurement than WOM. After all, it is more common to see a five-point rating on the website than hearing a friend saying 'I give this destination 5 points'.

Both WOM and eWOM have been considered as significant factors in determining consumer behavior due to their independence from commercial influence (Buttle, 1998; Gremler, Gwinner, & Brown, 2001; Jalivand & Samiei, 2012). eWOM also offers easier accesses for researchers compared to the difficulty of studying WOM in a face-to-face context (Hung & Li, 2007). Applied to the study of tourism, eWOM has been recognized as one of the most influential sources of information upon which a majority of travelers' decisions were based. (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2003; Crick, 2003; Shanka, Ali-Knight & Pope, 2002; Gretzel et al., 2007; Adamic, et al., 2011). For instance, travelers go on TripAdvisor to check the ratings and reviews from other travelers about the places they plan to visit (Gretzel, et al, 2007). Additionally, Ye et al (2009) found that online consumer reviews have significant impact on hotel booking online.

Given the popularity of eWOM, many researchers have conducted sets of studies. Cheung and Thadani (2012) systematically reviewed the existing literature on eWOM between 2000 and 2010. They identified several major types of eWOM from their analysis of 47 articles: online discussion forums, online consumer review sites, blogs, social networking sites and online bank/shopping sites. One of their findings is that the

majority of eWOM studies emphasized the “online consumer reviews made on e-commerce websites, discussion forums or rating sites. Other forms of eWOM have received far less attention in academic research” (2012, p. 462). Additionally, Golbeck (2009) stated that the already existing information from users’ profiles of SNSs provides researchers a negligibly invasive means to accumulate information about user’s social context. Pan et al. (2007) also suggested studying travelers’ experiences directly from their own words. Thus, this study seeks to give insights of the travelers’ reviews on non-commercialized forms of social networking sites, specifically host couch surfers’ references.

Some studies have specifically examined CouchSurfing references as a form of eWOM. Teng, Lauterbach, and Adamic (2010) found that online reputation systems users tend to be more reciprocal and positive when the ratings are publicly shown than ratings which are private or anonymous. Adamic et al. (2011) found that there is a lack of negative references in couch surfing reference systems. They discussed that reasons may be, namely the fear of reciprocated negative reference and discomfort in leaving negative references in public. However, these studies did not address the actual content of the host references. The question remained unclear in the literature “what are travelers saying online about their experiences?”

2.2 Methods

This study utilized a textual analysis approach in an attempt to discover couch surfers’ authentic experiences by reviewing the references left for hosts by previous surfers. Textual analysis is a method for gathering information about how members of a culture or subculture make sense of the world around them (McKee, 2003). References

are the comments or feedback couch surfers leave for hosts and surfer's on CouchSurfing website regarding their experiences after their in-person encounters. As the CouchSurfing organization claims that the references are supposed to be used to express experiences about couch surfers' encounters. In order to understand these experiences, it seems that analyzing the texts (in this study the references) in depth would provide the opportunity to better understand how couch surfers express their experiences through written comments on the CouchSurfing website. Particularly, traveling to another place is essentially making sense of the place, people and culture of the touring destination.

2.2.1 Participants and Data Collection

Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994) explain that text analysis offers an opportunity to deeply understand meaning by looking closely at words chosen and consider elements such as tone, diction, voice, allusions and attitude toward the audience. On the CouchSurfing website, there are already millions of references couch surfers articulated about their experiences. As the website indicates references are supposed to be the valid descriptions of couch surfers' experiences (CouchSurfing, 2013). These references provided an ideal channel for researchers to understand couch surfers' experiences by closely looking at the texts they contained.

Currently, there are over 5.5 million couch surfers around the world in 97,000 cities in 207 countries with millions of references. It is practically and logistically impossible to study all the references from all of these cities and countries. Instead, a sample of ten countries with the largest numbers of couch surfers were selected, respectively United States, Germany, France, Canada, England, Spain, Italy, Brazil, Australia, and China. Among these ten countries, participants were selected following the

procedures described below. Five popular places (Appendix A) of each country were chosen based on CouchSurfing most popular places ratings. It bears noting that even the participants of this study are from these 50 places in top ten countries, the participants references were left by people from all over the world. This allows the sample to better represent the general population of couch surfers.

After selecting the place, the “meet people” function for each place’s webpage was selected, which identified couch surfers in this area. Additionally, a sorting tool allows people to sort the couch surfers by relevance, experience, last login time, oldest profile and newest profile. Since the task of this study is to understand couch surfers’ experiences, couch surfers in each place are sorted by experience. Then the first 10 individual couch surfers on the result list were selected as participants of this study, whose references were collected directly from the CouchSurfing website. A total of 500 references were collected from experienced couch surfers from 50 popular places in 10 different countries. There are a total of 80,125 references, among which 98.63% (N=79,026) are positive, 1.22% (N=979) are neutral and 0.15% (N=120) are negative references.

2.2.2 Analysis Process

With such a large set of textual data, the challenge was to create a logical data analysis process. The data analysis process was adapted from Keats’ (2009) model of analyzing texts, which includes general reading of all texts, specific reading of texts, and relational readings. According to Keats, general reading of all texts would familiarize researchers with their data holistically and assist the meaning and patterns to emerge. The general impressions and reflective comments of the researcher were also recorded, as

well as the highlighting of unusual and distinctive references as Keats recommended. In the specific reading phase, Keats asserted that researchers can explore parts of the text which contributes to the meaning of the whole more extensively. The references that reflect authenticity in this stage of data analysis were also addressed. In relational readings, Keats' model has intra-textual reading that explores relationship of texts for one participant and inter-textual reading that focuses on specific types of text that capture the shared experience across participants. For this study, inter-textual reading in analyzing authentic experience across couch surfers was used.

This study analyzed all the neutral and negative references, and the first three positive references from each participant's reference list. Additionally, 30 participants were randomly chosen by utilizing random.org website and their entire profiles were analyzed to gain a full picture of what other couch surfers read instead of fragments of references. Overall, this study analyzed a corpus of 3,699 references. After analyzing the data multiple times, recurring patterns having to do with travelers' authentic experience were manifested in their online reviews. Guided by authenticity theory (MacCannell, 1976), the data was analyzed to reveal the subtext, hidden meanings and messages that reach a subconscious level of understanding of couch surfers' authentic experience.

2.3 Results and Discussions

For this study, the findings were organized according to Pollach's (2008) approach of text analysis of eWOM that focused on the text structure, content, audience appeals.

2.3.1 Structure and Format

Each reference includes three major parts: overall rating, information of encountering situation and description of experience. For the overall rating, the majority of the references are positive references. In the total references I collected, 98.63% (N=79,026) are positive, 1.22% (N=979) are neutral and 0.15% (N=120) are negative references. In the 3,699 sample references, there are 70.30% (N=2,600) positive references and 26.46% (N=979) neutral and 3.24% (N=120) negative references for textural analysis. The information of encountering situation section identifies the surfer and host, as well as where and when the couch surfers meet. For the description of experience, most of the commenters follow the CouchSurfing guideline of commenting about their experience encountering another couch surfer. A typical CouchSurfing references looks as follows:

Huang et al (2012) asserted that neat and well organized eWOM is easier to read and attracts readers. Most of the CouchSurfing references appear to be written in a free flow of information without much consideration of a neat structure or a clean format. A majority of the references appear to be a recollection of thoughts from previous encounters. Often pieces of information are scattered in the references without careful organization. One possible reason for this lack of structure is the length of a reference. Well-organized paragraphs with clear structure will increase the readability (Huang et al., 2012). CouchSurfing references are most likely to be one paragraph of approximately 100 words. It appears to be unnecessary to consider structures too much when the message is very short. For example, a three-sentence reference does not yield structure.

2.3.2 Content

For the content of references, five major patterns recur, particularly in positive references: 1) personality description of the couch surfer being commented; 2) highlights of the experience during the visit; 3) the capture of feelings and thoughts about certain events; 4) future wishes; 5) pseudo-reference that is too shallow and too short to reveal the real experience or even references were left without meeting the commentee in person. The last pattern, pseudo-reference, does not appear very often. Most references typically include a combination of any two, three or four of the first four themes.

In reference after reference, most of the negative references represent truly negative experiences. The reasons of negative references appear to be most commonly miscommunication, some mismatch of expectations, and rare occasions involving inappropriate sexual comments or actions. One thing in common of these negative references is that they usually describe the incidents in a more detailed manner than most of the positive references. For example:

It's truly a pity that I have to write this because the night started out great! A group of CSers met for a drink and then dinner and during this time, Max was very friendly, talkative, funny and I really enjoyed this time spent with him. However, later, 4 of us decided to go out and as my CS host lived outside of Rome, Max offered to host all 3 of us at his place. Around 3am I was super tired and Max wanted to continue going out. He repetitively asked me about the train schedule in which I kept answering, however, as his drinks were in full effect, he was not satisfied with my answer and started to get mad. At this point he started yelling at me in the middle of the street. I was so uncomfortable that I wasn't

about to stay with him. When I asked if they could just help me find a hostel his response was 'find a f-ing hostel yourself!' before ditching the 3 of us.

In neutral references, some are truly neutral that states the facts. On the one hand, people leave these neutral references because they honestly do not think they know enough about the couch surfer for which they are leaving a reference. On the other hand, when the experience is not particularly positive but not bad enough to leave a negative reference, couch surfers would explain what happened and why it is a neutral reference. Among the mismatch of rating and comments, some are positive comments with neutral ratings and some are neutral rating but hinted negative experiences. The neutral-hinting-negative references resemble the negative references in content that they are detail-oriented and longer.

In positive references content, most of the times appear to be true expressions of positive experience. However, there is a small portion of positive references could imply neutral experience regardless of the positive rating. These positive-hinting-neutral references usually can be identified through inter-textual comparison. For example, S42 leaves long references with dramatic positive words and exclamation marks to express her feelings towards majority of the couch surfers she left positive references for. However, there are a few positive references she left that are very neutral toned. The following is a comparative example of her references:

Positive reference:

WOW!!!! Perfect Couchsurfers!!!! I contacted Andres and Renata after posted a note on the board hoping to have an American style Thanksgiving dinner. We

invited to them come for dinner and stay for a few days. What a joy!! They stayed in contact from the road, ate dinner with us on the night of their arrival, made us dinner another night, and HELPED us get things ready for Thanksgiving. They are very self-sufficient. We would LOVE to have them come back and visit and truly believe we ever come to Norway, they would welcome us with open arms. If they contact you, say YES!!!

Rated positive but appears to be a neutral:

Warren is an interesting guy who stayed with us for a couple of days. He came for a spiritual conference during which time he slept in his van. During one night his window was broken so we helped him with phone numbers of pick a part places. During his two nights with us, he showed us his stamps and video about his spiritual ideas.”

In short, the content of a reference is not always matching the rating in couch surfing references. The commenter's true feelings can be hidden between the lines. When it is the case of hidden negative references, the reasons as Adamic et al. (2011) suggested are fear of scaring another's reputation and worrying about a reciprocated negative reference. Thus, the readers would need the time and practice to learn how to identify the nuances in these references.

2.3.3 Appeal to Audience

In the article “I rate you, you rate me, should we do it so publicly” Teng et al (2010) discussed the reciprocating nature of CouchSurfing references. They explained

that it is common courtesy to write a somewhat equivalent reference back to the original reference writer, usually the surfer. However, Teng et al did not specify to whom this public rating is written for besides the commentee. I found that it is most common the references address the commentee as a third person. A small portion of references are addressed directly to the commentee in first person (you). It is also not uncommon to see a mixture of addressing the commentee directly and also as a third person in one reference. Here are some examples.

[third person]: Joel was a fantastic host - gave a view of Wellington we hadn't found before, provided solid and interesting conversation, and was a fun geeking buddy. Also just a really good guy. I would want him with me for Zombie Apocalypse.

[directly]: Great to meet you in the CS meeting in HK. I really enjoy chatting with you, hope to see you again(when I visit New Zealand!)

[mixture]: Hey hey!! Zidan is an awesome host!! so friendly and happy. I had a good few sleeps on the floor ha! open minded young lady with lots of character and always up for fun. thanks so much I had a great time with you at your place =D if you make it to England your always welcome.

Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004) suggested that consumers post information online for the concerns of other consumers. The Couch surfers' approach of addressing the commentee as a third person seems to imply that they are

writing the references for future couch surfers. Meanwhile, couch surfers are aware that the person being commented is going to read their comments. This awareness of non-anonymity may create self-censorship while writing a comment about another person, particularly in the examples of positively or neutrally rated references with contents suggesting otherwise.

2.3.4 Existential Authenticity Manifested in CouchSurfing References

Wang's (1999) existential authenticity emphasizes the experience one feels through participating in activities. In reference after reference, couch surfers describe what they did with other couch surfers and how they would not get to experience any of those if it were not for their hosts. Some common activities include chatting, having meals and drinks at local restaurants and bars, attending music events, and going to tour sights. From the perspective of participating activities, couch surfers' references exhibit existential authenticity in their experiences. Ample example has described all kinds of activities couch surfers participated because of their hosts, for instance,

Wang (1999) also divided existential authenticity into two major forms: intra-personal authenticity and inter-personal authenticity. Intra-personal authenticity examines traveler's bodily feeling, sensual pleasures and self-making while traveling. Inter-personal authenticity focuses on the ties one creates with others while traveling, especially family and religious community members according to Wang (1999). Couch surfers' positive references reflected that they gain both intra-personal and inter-personal authenticity in their traveling experience through couch surfing. There are not many signs that reflect the self-making and ties with family and religious community members as Wang (1999) suggested. However, it is very common to see references that reveal bodily feeling type

of intra-personal authenticity and ties with the couch surfer's one encounter as a type of inter-personal authenticity. For instance, the following reference vividly illustrates the bodily feelings that indicate the intra-personal authenticity:

Ant and Mandy are beautiful, cheerful travelers willing to discover the world. Was a great pleasure dancing under the rain while dancing zamba (and other folk dances from our country), drinking red wine and eating empanadas next to the riverside :) see you around the globe!

However, the feelings couch surfers expressed in the neutral and negative references, even a small portion of positive references have not been discussed in Wang's (1999) existential authenticity theory. Wang's intra-personal authenticity includes positive feelings of "relaxation, rehabilitation, diversion, recreation, entertainment, refreshment, sensation-seeking, sensual pleasures, excitement, play and so on" (p.361). Common feelings in the negative and neutral references are frustration, anger, insecurity, and discomfort. For instance, one surfer described her frustrating experience with her host in a negative reference:

Julie seems like an extroverted and fun-loving person, but her real motivation for hosting you is to gently pressure you into repaying her for her hospitality with a burrito. And then a beer. And a shot, since she left work fifteen minutes early to be there for your arrival. Turns out, she doesn't have enough money to cover her share of the two orders of everything. I appreciate she tries to take me to local places and I don't mind buy a friend a beer, but it's just too annoying to feel being pressured into paying for stuff.

As such, should these negative feelings in the real situation be recognized as authentic experiences? These feelings revealed in negative and neutral reference do not fit in Wang's (1999) definition of bodily feelings in intra-personal authenticities. Yet, they are real genuine bodily feelings that were created through encounter with real local people regardless of the unpleasant nature of the experience. A major reason the backstage experience is considered authentic is it places one in a real life situation. As real life is never perfect, neither is traveling experiences. The experience would become unauthentic if all unpleasant feelings were omitted from the back stage. Thus, this study advocates these negative feelings should be recognized as authentic feelings.

CONCLUSION

This study took a textual analysis approach, as described by McKee (2003), to study authenticity manifested in the online comments couch surfers leave for each other about their experiences. After analyzing 3,699 references this study identified patterns and themes in the structure and style, content and appealing audience in the references. Results indicated that a couch surfing reference does not have a very clear structure due to its short length. The contents usually involves descriptions of another couch surfer's personality, highlights of the experience, the capture of feelings and thoughts, future wishes, and some pseudo references. This information provides a deeper understanding of non-commercialized eWOM in tourism studies.

This study confirmed previous researcher's findings about commercialized eWOM. First, commercialized eWOM are written for the concerns of other consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Couch surfers address the commentee as a third person

indicates that these references serve not only as capture of the past experience, but also as suggestions for future couch surfers who may encounter the same commentee. Second, Adamic et al (2011) finds that couch surfers are reluctant to leave negative references. The ratio of positive reference to negative reference also indicates that there is a lack of negative references. However, this study found that some positively and neutrally rated references are suggesting negative experience between the lines and tones. Future studies may consider confirming with these reference writers about their actual experience and the reasons of implying differently from the rating about their experience.

This study also closely looked at existential authenticity manifested in what the travelers are saying about their experiences within the contexts of references left by surfers for their hosts on CouchSurfing. Results suggest couch surfers generally achieve existential authenticity for the local activities they participate guided by their local hosts. The evidence implied that couch surfers gain intra-personal authenticity through bodily feelings and inter-personal authenticity through the connections with their hosts. However, couch surfers' references do not contain much information about self-making in intra-personal authenticity and family ties and religious community ties in inter-personal authenticity.

Tourism literature and the tourism industry almost always address authenticity as a positive term. However, couch surfers' negative and neutral references do exhibit unpleasant experiences with real local people from MacCannell's (1976) back stage, where authenticity supposed to be. It is not clear whether travelers' negative experiences that are created by encounters with back stage local people be recognized as authentic. Should authenticity only address the positive experience? There is no doubt many couch

surfers are seeking positive authentic experiences. However, when one encounters real life situations, the backstage, it seems inevitable for travelers will have a negative experience. Yet, this negative backstage experience is indeed a genuine and real life situation, therefore, should it not be considered authentic? As such, future research should further discuss traveler's negative experiences and authenticity.

Overall, this research shed new light on couch surfer's authentic experiences by way of examining references left for hosts posted on CouchSurfing. The key findings of this study are: 1) couch surfers' references revealed that they experienced existential authenticity; 2) these existential authenticity were mainly manifested in positive references; 3) some neutral and negative references should also be considered as part of the existential authenticity; 4) couch surfers' ratings do not necessarily reflect the real feelings, which often is hidden or inferred between lines in the actual written content of a reference.

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Appendix A: Popular Places among Top 10 Populated CouchSurfing Countries

Country	Popular Places
United States	New York Los Angeles San Francisco Bay Chicago Washington
Germany	Berlin Potsdam Düsseldorf Cologne Munich
France	Paris Lyon Lille Toulouse Mulhouse
Canada	Montreal Toronto Vancouver Quebec Ottawa
England	London Manchester Birmingham Bristol Oxford
Spain	Barcelona Madr Valencia Sevilla Granada
Italy	Milan Rome Bologna Padua Torino
Brazil	São Paulo Rio de Janeiro Belo Horizonte Porto Alegre Curitiba
Australia	Melbourne

	Sydney
	Brisbane
	Fremantle
	Perth
China	Shenzhen
	Beijing
	Shanghai
	Guangzhou
	Chengdu

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This study utilized a Mixed Method Research approach to explore social networking sites (SNSs) influence on travelers' experience. Particularly, this study explored the network hospitality-oriented example website CouchSurfing. This research utilized two major research questions to guide the investigation of couch surfer's authentic experiences. First, what experience does CouchSurfing create for travelers, before, during, and after their travel? Second, how does a couch surfer's experience relate to authenticity in context of network hospitality 2.0? Three major phases were examined: 1) factors that enable couch surfers meetings pre-traveling, 2) couch surfers' offline experiences during the encounter, and 3) couch surfers' comments on their experience after the in-person meetings. Studying each phase of the couch surfing process with a mixed methods approach painted a complete picture of how CouchSurfing as a travel-oriented SNS contribute to couch surfers' authentic experience. As such, targeting at one specific topic at a time, the research is presented in three independent manuscripts. The results from each step may also be used to generalize how SNSs impact travelers.

Article One: An Rasch Application on Couch Surfing Decision Making

The first article began with the online factors that facilitate couch surfers' decisions when they try to find a host before their traveling. Previous research addressed the importance of online information in travelers' decision making (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Chai, 2010; O' Conner, 2011; Kusumasondjaja, 2011; Ip et al, 2012), yet little is discussed regarding what information exactly are travelers fishing out of the vast sea of online information. This study extended previous research by examining the specific online content that couch surfers perceive as important in their decision making process.

The Rasch model was adopted to analyze the data. Thirty-eight items are extracted from CouchSurfing website. Only one item statistic (wheelchair accessibility) did not fit the model. The other 37 items data model fits well.

Among these 37 items, the most important item is the negative reference listed on a couch surfer's profile. Previous research in commercialized reviews found that moderate reviews are more helpful than extreme reviews that are too positive or too negative (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). The authors further claim that consumers tend to rely more on neutral reviews than extremely positive or extremely negative. However, contradicting Mudambi et al, the results of Rasch analysis, the factor couch surfers perceive as the most important is the negative references, which is generally considered very extreme. Future studies should consider comparing travelers' usage of commercial and non-commercial online reviews. Additionally, this study identified the top five factors couch surfers perceive important: 1) positive references, 2) negative references, 3) couch availability, 4) personal description and 5) pictures. On the one hand, from the marketing perspective, travel-oriented SNSs may want to adopt the same research method to evaluate their website's efficiency and re-arrange information in a way that helps users locate the most important information fastest. On the other hand, future researchers may want to explore why these particular factors are perceived important by the couch surfers.

After identifying and ranking the factors couch surfers perceive important in their decision making process pre-traveling, the authentic experience during and after the travel were explored in article two and three. In general, couch surfers seem to gain authentic experience during the encounter with their hosts, explained by interview data in article two and textual analysis data in article three.

Article Two: The Pursuit of Authenticity

MacCannell (1976) described five stages in his authenticity theory to explain why tourists are not gaining authentic experience during travel. He maintains tourists are presented different levels of front stages that are set up or staged experiences for tourists. In other words, tourists tend not to be able to gain authenticity because they are denied the access to the backstage, real-life circumstances. Article two found that by staying at a local person's real home it granted couch surfers the opportunity of accessing backstage, thus achieving authenticity. It can be inferred that social networking sites such as CouchSurfing provide more opportunities for tourists to gain authenticity because they now have the access to communicate directly with local people instead of professionals from tourism industry.

In addition to the exploration of MacCannell's authenticity in couch surfers' experiences, this study also employed Wang's (1999) suggestion of exploring existential authenticity empirically. Wang (1999) theoretically categorized existential authenticity into inter-personal and intra-personal authenticity. The second article of this dissertation applied these theoretical perspectives into practical situations and found that couch surfers gain both inter-personal and intra-personal authenticity. Couch surfers seem to gain a sense of self-achievement and bodily feelings in intra-personal authenticity. Wang's inter-personal authenticity, mainly addresses the ties between family and religious communities. Correspondingly, couch surfers connections to their hosts seem to cultivate inter-personal authenticity in the sense of both friendship ties and touristic

communities. Couch surfers have disclosed similar traits as Wang's inter-personal authenticity. Future studies may want to explore specifically should these ties with friends and touristic communities be recognized as inter-personal authenticity.

Article Three: A Textual Analysis of Online Travelers' Reviews: Couch Surfers' Authentic Experience Manifested in References

Article three examined couch surfing authentic experience by examining online reviews travelers post after their trip, in particular host references left by visiting couch surfers. Evidence was found in the positive references that couch surfers experience existential authenticity in both intra-personal authenticity and inter-personal authenticity. Negative references carry the evidence of genuine unpleasant feelings created by encounter with local residents. This study explained that these negative feeling should be included in the existential authenticity. Moreover, the results suggested that couch surfers do not pay much attention to the sentence structure because of the short length of the references left. Additionally, data implies that couch surfers sometimes write the content of eWOM different from the ratings they provide. Readers need to pay additional attention to the implied meaning by reading between lines and inferred tones through the use of adjectives (or lack there of), punctuation, and/or the use of tools to emphasize words (bold, underline, italicize, all caps).

In summary, this study provided in-depth understanding of travelers' authentic experience with the assistance of social networking sites in each phase of the traveling process. Mixed method research approach in this study proved to be a useful way of providing rich information in understanding the whole picture more in-depth.

CouchSurfing provided the opportunities for couch surfers to experience authenticity

during their travel. As an example of SNS and Network 2.0 CouchSurfing also functioned as a platform for couch surfers to seek this authentic experience opportunity pre-travel and express and share their experience after the trip. Future studies should look into expand this research by exploring travelers experience through other social networking sites.

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