Citizens of the world: An Autoethnography of Couchsurfing and Uncertainty Reduction

Theory

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by

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Dedication

Soli Deo Gloria

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Abstract

This study examines through an autoethnography the culture of couchsurfing and the process of hospitality networks through computer mediated communication in five European countries during three months of 2012. Using Maslow hierarchy of needs as a framework the study was divided into five topics and analyzed using Uncertainty reduction theory.

The study found that couchsurfers have needs and prioritize these needs as The hierarchy of needs predicts. CouchSurfers also employ uncertainty reduction strategies similar to those use within computer mediated communication when choosing their host. Over 20 hosting experiences have been analyzed in this study. The field data was collected through personal journal entries, blog posts and photographs.

Keywords and topics located in this thesis: Autoethnography, Backpacking, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Uncertainty Reduction Theory, Couchsurfing Hospitality Network, Computer Mediated Communication.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

"For mine is a generation that circles the globe and searches for something we haven't tried before. So never refuse an invitation, never resist the unfamiliar, never fail to be polite and never outstay the welcome. Just keep your mind open and suck in the experience. And if it hurts, you know what? It's probably worth it."

--Alex Garland (*The Beach*, Travel.CNN.com, August 20, 2012)

This line from the book, *The Beach,* embodies the spirit of travel that is burgeoning amongst millennials today. The undeniable desire to travel the world in search of new adventures was once restricted by finances, scheduling, and perhaps fear. For years, adventurers have attempted to overcome these obstacles by backpacking across the globe staying in hostels or youth hostels, etc. However, a new trend is making travel even more accessible and more personal.

Travelers looking for an alternative form of tourism are utilizing social media and the internet to make connections as well as travel arrangements. Hospitality exchange networks are online social networks where an individual offers a free place to stay in their home for travelers from around the world. There are numerous websites which approach hospitality exchange in different ways.

For example, Wayn.com claims to be the largest travel and lifestyle social network with 22,746.388 members currently. Members are able to learn about a destination from posts generated by local users of the destination searched as well as reviews from other travelers. There are photos, tips, questions and advertisements of where the users can find hotels and travel

tickets for the destination researched. People can also meet on Wayn.com but their interaction resembles more of a dating website.

InterNations is a network where expatriates exchange tips on international schools, housing, visas, city guides and more. Membership is invitation based and members resemble the institutionalized tourism model with long term travelers seeking professional and personal connections. TravBuddy is a network where travelers can contact each other and receive updates when someone is traveling nearby with similar interests. Membership costs about $10 as a one time fee.

Some of the networking websites are more personal. The website gapyear.com is where users can locate travel mates, find locations to volunteer while traveling and ideas and inspiration for the journey. Membership is free and like other traveling websites many advertisements about plane tickets and hotel accommodations are found on this website. On a website called travellerspoint.com the members area consists of a shared collection of photos, blog entries and statistics and trips that makes a tour guide book filled with personal stories. On bewelcome.org, users are encouraged to cook together, practice a local language, exchange recipes and sleep at the a local's residence. There is no cost for signing up but there is no verification process.

Lastly, there is couchsurfing.org. The couchsurfing project was started in the United States in 2003 but was formally launched in 2004. According to the couchsurfing website the idea began when the founder, Casey Fenton, traveled to Iceland and sent an email to 1500 students at the University of Iceland to see if anyone would be interested in hosting him for a few days. He received 50-100 replies and the idea for couchsurfing was born.

Currently, the website states that nine million people are registered in the website from

across the globe. These individuals speak over 180 languages and live in 683 cities. The mission

of the company states,

> "We envision a world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections
>
> with the people and places they encounter. Building meaningful connections across
>
> cultures enables us to respond to diversity with curiosity, appreciation and respect. The
>
> appreciation of diversity spreads tolerance and creates a global community."
>
> (2014, October 1). Retrieved from https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/values.

From that mission statement the couchsurfing values are derived. The core couchsurfing

values are: (1) share your life (2) create connection (3) offer kindness (4) stay curious and (5)

leave it better than you found it.

How It Works

Couchsurfers are people who create an online profile at www.couchsurfing.org describing

their interests, philosophy, hobbies, and experiences. The profile becomes a part of a database

accessible worldwide by members who are able to find other users with similar interests whom

they want to know more about through hosting, meeting at an event or traveling together.

Another way to find a host or meet other surfers is to attend couchsurfing events. Surfers are

often from a different country or town and spend a few days visiting the city. Much research goes

into finding a host and learning about the destination.

The more you travel the more credibility you build as people give you favorable

references following your stay. For couch surfers who do not have many references or have not

been a long term member there is an option available to give them more credibility in the

couchsurfing community. They can pay a one-time fee of $25 to verify the living arrangements

for an upcoming trip by sending a postcard with a code which can be entered at the website.

Being a verified member is no guarantee of finding a host because surfers still value the feedback

of other surfers and the information on the profile.

The couchsurfing website allows several types of interaction that foster communication

between strangers. Surfers can search for hosts in the database based on location, lifestyle, or

other preferences. Furthermore, there are several discussion groups in a forum format within

couchsurfing.org. These groups allow users to ask questions and request advice and lodging

information. After extensive traveling as well as a strong demonstration of couchsurfing values,

enthusiasts are nominated through a system of anonymity to become couchsurfing ambassadors.

The following is a blog excerpt from a couchsurfing.org staff member/ ambassador while

traveling in Kenya:

> "My host is a mother of four, an avid host of Couchsurfers and the founder of a
>
> Foundation which runs a school in the slum near the Komarocks region for
>
> approximately 35 students. The kids range from ages 3 to 12 and are taught by
>
> volunteers, sourced through various homestay and voluntourism sites. She loves having a
>
> busy, bustling home and also invites Couchsurfers to come and assist at the school for a
>
> day or so. The current set of desks used by the students were built by a previous
>
> Couchsurfing group, and serves as the only furniture in the school's temporary location –
>
> a shed" (Barlow, 2014).

This post demonstrates the core values of couchsurfing and shows how surfers meet the needs of

other surfers and reduce uncertainty while traveling.

I had first hand experience with couchsurfing. After registering with couchsurfing.org, the researcher embarked on a three-month journey and couchsurfed across 5 different countries. The experience not only exposed me to different cultures but also to the culture of couchsurfing itself. A reflective look at the three-month sojourn will aid in helping others understand this unique sub-culture. Experiences from the voyage were documented through an active blog, a personal journal, and photography. All of these materials will be utilized in order to better analyze the couchsurfing culture.

Due to the participatory and reflexive nature of the research, a autoethnographic analysis is appropriate. Autoethnography allows a researcher to develop a greater understanding of himself, others, and specifically couchsurfers. Kennett (1999) concurs with other advocates of self-reflection, "writing cultural autobiography allows students to reflect on the forces that have shaped their character and informed their sense of self" (p. 231). The power of autoethnography comes from the understanding; the forces that shape people's sense of self include nationality, religion, gender, education, ethnicity, socio-economic class, and geography. Understanding "the forces" also helps them examine their preconceptions and feelings about others, whether they are "others of similarity," "others of difference," or even "others of opposition" (Chang, 2005).

The benefits of autoethnography go beyond the ability for me to present the data as an autobiography; it allows the readers to have a more personal and relatable understanding of the research presented through engaging writing. There is a potential for bias in this qualitative study. However, the collection of multiple sources of evidence, the establishment of a chain of evidence, and the use of peer review will be used to helped establish this research as a scholarly rather than an emotional or unreasoned account.

Autoethnography will allow me to discuss the culture of couchsurfing from my first-hand experiences. The most common questions people ask about my couchsurfing experiences is related to fear of the unknown and safety. Whenever I mention couchsurfing to someone who has never heard the concept, the first question is always something to the effect of: "Isn't that dangerous? What if you encounter a serial killer?" I don't mean to downplay the significance of these questions. These were certainly questions I wondered about myself. After all, safety is one of the most basic needs in life. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as well as Uncertainty Reduction Theory will provide an interesting theoretical framework for examining couchsurfers motivations and experiences in order to better understand this unique culture.

The purpose of the study is to better understand the culture of couchsurfing. The following research questions will aid in exploring this topic.

RQ1: Does Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs influence the Uncertainty Reduction Strategies of Couchsurfers?

RQ 2: How do concerns over safety & shelter play a role in Uncertainty Reduction?

RQ3: How does culture influence Uncertainty Reduction?

RQ3A: How do language barriers influence Uncertainty Reduction?

RQ3B: How is community established in the midst of Uncertainty?

RQ3C: How do values & religion influence Uncertainty Reduction?

The next four chapters of this thesis will consist of a Literature Review, Methodology, Results and Discussion. First, the Literature Review will take a closer look at the research related to (1) hospitality exchange networks and couchsurfing; (2) Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; (3) Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Strategies; (4) Computer-Mediated Communication; and (5)

Culture. Then, the methodology chapter will explore autoethnography in more detail. Next, data from the blog, journal and photos will be presented in the results chapter. Finally, the discussion chapter will seek to answer the research questions, discuss implications of the study as well as suggestions for future research and offer some concluding thoughts about the couchsurfing culture.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

This literature review will further explain (1) hospitality exchange networks and couchsurfing. It will provide the background and use of (2) Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; as well as (3) Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Strategies; The literature reviewed will examine how strategies to reduce uncertainty are implemented online and offline and the strategies which research shows are the most used online. The review will also show how the strategies relate to the (4) computer mediated communication used in the hospitality networks; Finally the literature review will take a closer look at (5) culture. In particular, the interest of this review is on uncertainty reduction online and its implications on the culture of couchsurfing.

Some of the themes found in this literature review are self-disclosure and the motivations that lead people to communicate. Uncertainty reduction as it relates to social attraction is also a common topic among computer mediated communication literature. Backpacking culture, alternative tourism studies, and Eric Cohen's analysis of travelers are other topics used to explain the 'authenticity' of couchsurfing as a traveling style and hospitality network.

Hospitality Exchange Networks and couchsurfing

The first study to analyze the typology of travelers was made by Erik Cohen (1972) where he categorized travelers as institutionalized and non-institutionalized. Furthermore, within institutionalized travelers there are two subdivisions known as organized-groups and individual mass tourists. Non-institutionalized travelers are subdivided into explorers and drifters.

The existing body of research suggests that non-institutionalized tourists tend to travel for long periods, have no rigid plans, and have a vague notion regarding their return (Cohen 1972,

1973, 1982; Riley 1988; Vogt 1976). They are also characterized by budget limitations that

determine their tendency for low spending (Riley 1988; Teas 1974). They eat in low-priced

restaurants, use public means of transportation, and do not reside in expensive hotels (Cohen

1972, 1973; Loker 1993; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Pearce 1990a; Riley 1988; Vogt

1976).

Cohen distinguishes between "inward-oriented" and "outward-oriented" drifters,

according to their tendency to interact mainly with counterparts rather than with locals,

respectively. He also makes the distinction between "full-time" and "part-time" drifters,

observing that most non-institutionalized travelers are students or junior employees on a

prolonged summer vacation rather than timeless drifters.

The problem with institutionalized tourism that intends to give tourists a cultural

experience is that sometimes the backstage is also 'fake' and put up intentionally for the public,

replacing authentic experiences with 'staged authenticity'. Because the backstage is constructed,

hosts are required to go even further backstage to an ancillary location wherein they can be

removed from the tourist gaze (MacCannell, 1976). Thus the implications of online hospitality

networks like couchsurfing are only now being analyzed in depth by researchers interested in

overlapping questions of trust, intimacy, friendship, identity, technology, mobility, and power.

The emerging research on couchsurfing has foregrounded a variety of concepts, such as

risk and online reputation systems (Lauterbach, Truong, Shah, & Adamic, 2009; Bialski and

Batorski 2010; Farbrother 2010; Tan 2010). In her article on the 'technologies of hospitality,'

Paula Bialski points out the ways in which couchsurfing encounters differ from both commercial

hospitality enterprises and from informal hospitality offered between friends.

As Bialski argues, technologies of hospitality enable strangers to connect with one another in unprecedented ways; however, in the absence of a common history, shared social ties, or face-to-face cues like eye contact, individuals must rely on other means of gauging trustworthiness.

Germann Molz has considered how 'the reputation systems on the hospitality exchange website act as a kind of surveillance mechanism that monitors the reciprocity between hosts and guests, but that also secures the face-to-face meeting between strangers and controls the boundaries of the hospitality community' (Molz 2007, p. 66). In couchsurfing, however, host and guest roles are blurred, and members must negotiate the appropriate terms of reciprocity on a case-by-case basis as part of their interpersonal interaction with one another. In the context of online communities, authorities are scarce, emphasizing the primordial role trust plays (Cook, 2005). Such trust is also the subject of many studies about e-commerce websites, since there is money exchange and online risks such as identity theft and computer hacking.

At the same time Sohn and Leckenby's (2007) study shows that the resource exchange structure plays a vital role in the success of online communities. When couchsurfing members host travelers, they have much to gain but also much to lose, such as personal belongings, intimacy, personal space, etc. Since it is difficult to locate someone who is traveling, institutional backings (e.g. Police) are less helpful if something unfortunate happens.

There are some online tools from the couchsurfing website which are used to help the development of trust; the focus of this study is to understand how the use of such tools combined with URT strategies helps hosts decide about guests.

In their study about couchsurging, Rosen and Hendrickson (2011) found community members are more likely to respond to another member's request if they were contacted through a direct e-mail rather than a group e-mail; furthermore, the longer an individual has been a member of the community they are less likely to reply to group e-mails requesting information.

As length of membership in the community increases, there is a parallel increase in the amount of contact with other members. This positive correlation leads to the accumulation of references, friendships, and social capital that helps members build a positive reputation; however, this may decrease one's need to continue to engage in instrumental moves to bolster their reputation. On the other hand, novice members may feel a greater need to strengthen their profile, or increase their status (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007).

Although the Rosen and Hendrickson (2011) study revealed that community members are more likely to respond to another member's request if they were contacted through a direct e-mail rather than a group e-mail, these members may be more inclined to host others or provide helpful information even when requested via group message. Moreover, all correspondence between members via the couchsurfing internal messaging system is recorded and kept for future reference in the event of a safety related incident.

Members who attend couchsurfing gatherings are exerting more personal effort into the community, engaging in direct mutual influence and discussion with other members, integrating their own social needs with the needs of other members by exchanging informational and physical resources, and becoming emotionally closer through social contact (Hersberger, Murray, & Rioux, 2007). Rohe (2004) emphasizes that engagement doesn't necessarily lead to trust and that little is known about the impact that different types of engagement have on trust.

Couchsurfing offers several indicators of a member's engagement in the community, such as length of membership, hosting others, couchsurfing with others, organizing gatherings, attending gatherings, volunteering at collectives, and serving as an ambassador, but Rohe also makes it clear that simply being part of or engaged in a community does not inherently lead one to more trust.

Tan (2010) found that for couchsurfing users trust went beyond physical safety to also include a feeling of membership in the community. According to Hersberger et al.'s (2007) model, as individuals engage in the various foundation tier activities they should develop an increased sense of belonging. Their model posits in the third and fourth tier that one can engage in information exchange and sharing without developing a greater sense of belonging to the community.

Bialski argues that this fluidity can produce deeply meaningful, trustful, and transformative encounters between strangers, but that it also entails risk. Hospitality is always a risky affair, pivoting on the ever-present possibility that the guest may, in fact, become an enemy or a parasite of the host's generosity (Derrida, 2000, p. 59). Although these experiences can sour people, and therefore dampen their willingness to receive guests, which can manifest itself as expressly denying the guest's stay, many simply consign the experience to misfortune.

One of the ways couchsurfing would remedy such issues is by requiring users to choose a friendship type for each connection; couchsurfing is able to overcome the issues other social networks have in eliciting this information when it is made optional. It is for this reason, that a host's reputation online is contingent on a reciprocal exchange of positive feedback within the couchsurfing community. Therefore, couchsurfing, with its emphasis on reciprocity and

individuation, entails a more open-ended dialogical exchange, although users who met through

couchsurfing collectives are just as likely to vouch for each other as those who met outside of

couchsurfing. This suggests, although the differences are slight, couchsurfing activities that

allow friendships to transition and grow offline are more likely to result in vouches.

Couchsurfing collectives are gatherings of volunteers that are intended to foster close

ties between members as they work together on improving the site, participants enjoy an exotic

and fun environment, as well as free meals and accommodation. They are invited in order to

contribute toward improving the couchsurfing experience for everyone.

Couchsurfers are also encouraged to leave feedback, even if the feedback is negative or

even reporting a crime committed, the downside of negative feedback, which perhaps would

explain why there are only a few, is that others would be more inclined in the future to cast a

"negative feedback," so to speak. This way, the individual receiving the anonymous negative

feedback would be voted out of the community through a form of online excommunication.

Resnick and Zeckhauser (2002) calls this the "stoning" bad behavior and suggest a way to

counteract these problems is paying initiation dues and the other is "stoning" bad behavior.

Knobloch and Solomon (2002) explain in their elaboration on information seeking

beyond initial interaction that people will be more willing to engage in direct information-

seeking behavior when they have greater latitude for coping with the information gained,

namely, when their partner lacks dependence power or punitive power.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

American psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed in 1943 that the human behavior

could be explained by the process of satisfying needs, this theory was developed and today

receives the name of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The theory represents an attempt to explain the broad ranges of human actions as a response to a set of universal motivating factors or needs (Seeley, 1992) Maslow did not propose that the behaviors motivated by these needs were also universal.

The needs operate on motivation at the subconscious level, while the resulting behavior is filtered though our conscious evaluation processes. The expression of the needs into behavior is thus subject to the influences of learning, tradition, and cultural mores and constraints. Different cultures, even different individuals within the same culture, may exhibit outwardly different behaviors in response to the desire to satisfy the same basic needs. Maslow organizes this vast set of human needs into five general categories: physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization.

The physiological needs represent those requirements that are necessary to our physical survival. These are biological needs. They consist of needs for oxygen, food, water, and a relatively constant body temperature. They are the strongest needs because if a person were deprived of all needs, the physiological ones would come first in the person's search for satisfaction.

The safety needs encompass the desire to be free from danger and anxiety that arise from feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. When all physiological needs are satisfied and are no longer controlling thoughts and behaviors, the needs for security can become active. The belongingness needs, sometimes referred to as the love needs, contain a variety of desires running from a sense of affiliation (i.e., membership in clubs, churches, work affiliations, etc.) to friendship and love of spouses, children, and parents. Maslow states that people seek to

overcome feelings of loneliness and alienation. This involves both giving and receiving love, affection and the sense of belonging.

The esteem needs represent an individual's desire for feelings of self confidence and adequacy. This category includes internal desires for strength, achievement, independence, or external factors such as reputations, prestige, and recognition.When the first three classes of needs are satisfied, the needs for esteem can become dominant.

Self-actualization is, in the most general terms, the desire to realize one's full potential. It represents the need for growth and can never be completely satisfied. The construct of self-actualization is the least defined category of human needs, and it occupied much of Maslow's applied work (Maslow, 1943). If a person is hungry, unsafe, not loved or accepted, or lacking self-esteem, it is very easy to know what the person is restless about. It is not always clear what a person wants when there is a need for self-actualization.

According to Maslow's theory, the lower-level physiological and safety needs must be satisfied before the higher-order needs become meaningful. Once these basic needs are satisfied, the individual moves on to attempting to satisfy higher-order needs such as self-esteem. In reality, it is unlikely that people move through the needs hierarchy in a tier level manner.

Marketing companies also uses Maslow's hierarchy. Lower-level needs are an ongoing source of motivation for consumer purchase behavior. However, since basic physiological needs are met in most developed countries, marketers often sell products that fill basic physiological needs by appealing to consumers' higher-level needs.

While Maslow's need hierarchy has flaws, it offers a framework for marketers to use in determining what needs they want their products and services to be shown satisfying. For this

research, Maslow provides a framework for organizing priority when dealing with uncertainty while couchsurfing.

As populations in Westernized economies have moved up Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, having fulfilled the 'basics', they have become much more concerned with issues of self-esteem and self-actualization. Thus from a marketing perspective, their requirements of brands have also evolved such that the functional or rational aspects, while still essential as 'hygiene factors', have become of less interest to the customer than emotional and psychological attributes. Such perceptions also carry over to travelers and specially couchsurfers.

Besides using Maslow's hierarchy of needs to provide a framework of study, this research will examine the influence of the hierarchy on uncertainty reduction strategies used by couchsurfers. The theory will also help to understand how couchsurfers prioritize and decide what host they will stay with. "Motivation is what leads us to do things" (Shinn, 1986). Besides the hierarchy of needs Maslow developed the theory of motivation widely used in the psychology field today.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Strategies

Developed by Berger and Calabrese in 1975, the theory identifies two types of uncertainties that are prominent in social situations. Cognitive uncertainty arises when individuals are unsure about their own beliefs or the beliefs of others while behavioral uncertainty occurs when people are unsure about their own actions or the actions of others.

Briefly, uncertainty exists when individuals lack information about their surroundings, individuals particularly desire to alleviate uncertainty when they expect to engage in future interaction with a person (Knobloch, 2009). In the context of couchsurfing, uncertainty exists at

many levels. A couchsurfer is uncertain about lodging until a host approves the request. A host is

uncertain about the safety of allowing a stranger into his house. Both parties are uncertain about

their ability to relate prior to initial face-to-face interaction. The couchsurfing experience will be

elaborated on more later in this review.

　　　One interesting variable about the couchsurfing project is that individuals tend to host a

surfer only once; therefore, this literature review attempts to present the other motivations that

lead hosts to engage in uncertainty reduction strategies. In their study about the role of

motivation in Uncertainty Reduction, Kellermann and Reynolds (1990) discovered that persons

anticipating future interaction also recalled more about their conversational partners, provided

more elaborate descriptions of them, and made more attributions about them. According to URT,

uncertainty reduction is the exchange and collection of information that allows one to predict

another's attitudes and behaviors (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

　　　 Berger (1979) claimed that this increased monitoring/awareness/information seeking is

due to heightened concern for uncertainty reduction, regardless of one's uncertainty level.

Besides anticipation of future interaction Berger also identified two other antecedents of

heightened concern for uncertainty reduction: deviance and incentive value where participants

are motivated to reduce uncertainty when they interact with people whom they expect to provide

rewards to them, behave in some deviant fashion, and/or interact with in the future. He also

argued that incentive value along with deviance and anticipation of future interaction, affects

one's tolerance for uncertainty rather than directly influencing the behaviors of the uncertainty

reduction process. Sunnafrank (1986) argued that one particular type of incentive value

determines the behaviors of the uncertainty reduction process and that motivations to reduce

uncertainty is not a primary concern in initial interactions. His belief was that a "maximization of

relational outcomes" (p. 9) was of more significant concern in initial encounters. Berger (1986)

combated Sunnafrank's arguments by acknowledging that outcomes cannot be predicted if there

is no previous history of interaction regarding the behavior of individuals and that Sunnafrank's

arguments simply expanded his theory.

Kellermann and Reynolds (1990) state the conflict between the two authors saying that

anticipation of future interaction seems to have both direct and indirect effects on monitoring/

information seeking. Second, deviance is neither a determinant of tolerance for uncertainty nor

of information seeking; rather, it is positively correlated with uncertainty and will affect one's

tolerance for uncertainty when future interaction is anticipated and will have no effect when

future interaction is not anticipated. Third, incentive value also fails to be a determinant of

tolerance for uncertainty although it is a determinant of information seeking as well as level of

uncertainty. Furthermore, both deviance and incentive value failed to serve as antecedents of

tolerance for uncertainty and both affected one's level of uncertainty. In other words, anticipation

of future interaction, deviance, and incentive value are fundamentally different types of variables

and should not be treated as "three antecedents of tolerance for uncertainty." Instead are all are

all determinants of attraction (Kellermann and Reynolds,1990, p. 65).

Berger (1979) identified three types of strategies that individuals use to find out

information about others in order to reduce uncertainty about them: passive, active, and

interactive. As discussed later in this literature review, internet scholars adapted this framework

to apply to reduction of uncertainty in CMC contexts, adding an alternative category of

"extractive" information-seeking strategies that are likely to be particularly prevalent. Interactive

strategies refer to acquisition of information through direct interaction between communicator

and target (interactants).

Interactive strategies for uncertainty reduction require direct and obtrusive exchanges

with targets. The first, deception detection, involves identification of falsifications, distortions, or

omissions of information. Second, verbal interrogation refers to question asking. Finally, self-

disclosure is that which a person knowingly communicates to another about him- or herself,

which is not publicly known (Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969).

Passive strategies involve acquiring information about a target through unobtrusive

observations which require public settings, rather than private ones. Active strategies involve

acquiring information from other individuals without direct interaction with the target and can be

more difficult to deploy in CMC than FtF, as they require certain resources that may be less

available online.

Extractive strategies encompass a variety of non-interactive strategies such as conducting

online background checks or using a search engine such as Google. There are some issues with

extractive strategies and CMC such as targets not having an online account of their past

activities. The use of uncertainty reduction strategies online is better explained next.

Uncertainty reduction theory's original seven original axioms are as follows:

Axiom 1: Given the high level of uncertainty present at the onset of the entry phase, as

the amount of verbal communication between strangers increase, the level of uncertainty

for each interactant in the relationship will decrease. As uncertainty is further reduced,

the amount of verbal communication will increase.

Axiom 2: As nonverbal affiliative expressiveness increases, uncertainty levels will decrease in an initial interaction situation. In addition, decreases in uncertainty level will cause increases in nonverbal affiliative expressiveness.

Axiom 3: High levels of uncertainty cause increases in information seeking behavior. As uncertainty levels decline, information seeking behavior decreases.

Axiom 4: High levels of uncertainty in a relationship cause decreases in the intimacy level of communication content. low levels of uncertainty produce high levels of intimacy.

Axiom 5: High levels of uncertainty produce high rates of reciprocity. Low levels of uncertainty produce low reciprocity rates.

Axiom 6: Similarities between persons reduce uncertainty, while dissimilarities produce increases in uncertainty.

Axiom 7: Increases in uncertainty level produce decreases in liking. Decreases in uncertainty level produce increases in liking (Kellermann and Reynolds, 1990, p. 65)

Twenty-one theorems came out of the original theory, by pairing each axiom with every other axiom. They are as follows:

1. Amount of verbal communication and nonverbal affiliative expressiveness are positively related.

2. Amount of communication and intimacy level of communication are positively related.

3. Amount of communication and information seeking behavior are inversely related.

4. Amount of communication and reciprocity rate are inversely related.

5. Amount of communication and liking are positively related.

6. Amount of communication and similarity are positively related.

7. Nonverbal affiliative expressiveness and intimacy level of communication content are positively related.

8. Nonverbal affiliative expressiveness and information seeking are inversely related.

9. Nonverbal affiliative expressiveness and reciprocity rate are inversely related.

10. Nonverbal affiliative expressiveness and similarity are positively related.

11. Nonverbal affiliative expressiveness and similarity are positively related.

12. Intimacy level of communication content and information seeking are inversely related.

13. Intimacy level of communication content and reciprocity rate are inversely related.

14. Intimacy level of communication content and liking are positively related.

15. Intimacy level of communication content and similarity are positively related.

16. Information seeking and reciprocity rate are positively related.

17. Information seeking and liking are negatively related.

18. Information seeking and similarity are negatively related.

19. Reciprocity and liking are negatively related.

20. Reciprocity rate and similarity are negatively related.

21. Similarity and liking are positively related. (Kellermann and Reynolds,1990)

The basic theme of the axioms is that as communication increases, uncertainty decreases, which leads to positive relational outcomes such as attraction and liking.

Most empirical work associated with URT provided support for these axioms. For example, Harvey, Wells, and Alvarez (1978) found high uncertainty is a contributor to relational disintegration. Planalp and Honeycutt (1985) observed that increased uncertainty produced negative relational consequences. Similarly Douglas (1990) found that as interactants decreased uncertainty, attraction to their partner increased. Prisbell and Anderson (1980) found that as similarity among interactants increased, uncertainty decreased. Booth-Butterfield and Koester (1988) found that the reduction of uncertainty alleviated group tension. Van Lear and Trujillo (1986) reported that uncertainty reduction is a necessary condition for liking although there is also disagreement about some of the axioms and theorems.

Kellermann and Reynolds (1990) disagree with axiom 3 and argue that it should be removed from uncertainty reduction theory saying that despite the intuitive appeal this axiom has, level of uncertainty simply did not correlate with information seeking in their study as well as in other studies. Their research demonstrated that incentive value is neither an antecedent of tolerance to uncertainty nor a condition that determines when information seeking and liking will be positively versus negatively associated. While uncertainty reduction theory neither predicts nor accounts for a positive association between information seeking and liking, Sunnafranks (1986) reformulation of the theory made precisely this prediction when expected outcomes are positive. Despite axiom 3 being viewed with suspicion and skepticism, a stable effect of uncertainty on liking occurs. Kellermann and Reynolds (1990) conclude their study stating that information seeking and liking are positively associated, although neither uncertainty reduction theory nor its reformulation by Sunnafranks is capable of accounting for why that relationship occurs.

Scholars have criticized URT for underestimating people's drive to maximize rewards and minimize costs. Individuals may be more motivated to forecast the potential outcomes of interaction than to reduce uncertainty per se. Another criticism is that individuals may seek to preserve or even foster uncertainty (Knoblock, 2009). Such can certainly be the case among couchsurfers whose future interactions can be close to none. Consequently, uncertainty is linked directly to duration of the stay.

Incentive value is defined as the belief that other persons can satisfy certain needs that one has or serve as potential sources of support. (Kellermann & Reynolds, 1990). Therefore, for a couchsurfer, the approval of a hosting request is the incentive value for reducing uncertainty and increasing self-disclosure. In regards to deviation, Steylaerts and Dubhghaill (2011) state that there is clearly an expectation among couchsurfers, whether expressed or not, that certain norms of the locale will be followed.

The ability to withdraw a reliable connection between a presented persona online and a corporeally-anchored person in the physical world is referred to as warranting (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009). URT was found to account not only for behavior in face to face settings, as it originally pertained, but in electronic settings as well. Both FtF and CMC interactants exhibited efforts to become acquainted with their conversational partners, and participants exhibited classic uncertainty-reducing strategies with slight modifications to accommodate differences in the communication channel as they asked questions and performed self- disclosures with their partners.

Research has demonstrated that CMC users engage in information-seeking strategies to reduce uncertainty and warrant identity claims in other contexts such as email communication

(Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Throughout the next few pages, this literature review will look at

other hosting network websites and research about online dating websites that analyzes the use of

uncertainty reduction using computer mediated communication.

Computer Mediated Communication in the Hospitality networks

As Knoblock (2002) noted on a study about uncertainty reduction strategies within online

dating, participants engaged in a variety of uncertainty reduction strategies, including some with

high warranting value, such as checking public records and using Google to search for self-

presentational discrepancies. However, Googling was reported as the least popular uncertainty

reduction strategy among participants.

Gudykunst and Kim (1997) state that individuals have maximum and minimum amount

thresholds of uncertainty. If uncertainties exist about individuals' minimum threshold, they may

not have enough information to communicate or they may feel uncomfortable communicating.

Though Google provides the highest potential to provide true warranting value it is only

possible when one has access to information often not provided by the profile—one's real first

and last name or email address. On the other hand there is limited research about the use of

Facebook or other social networking websites in the aid of uncertainty reduction.

Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs (2006) found that the online daters depended upon small cues

such as the time stamp, style of language used, spelling and grammar mistakes, and length of

message in order to form an impression of other members within the online dating community.

Although online communication can lack characteristics of traditional face-to-face encounters,

such as physical proximity and personal appearance, people in online arenas are still able to

reduce uncertainty about individuals they encounter over the web (Antheunis, Patti, and Jochen,

2000; Sheldon, 2009). Passive strategies used online and even on the couchsurfing website would be reading messages posted on a central forum and reviewing buddy profiles such as the recommendations left by previous hosts and friends on a couchsurfer profile.

Another tactic used by online users is similar to an unspoken code of conduct where communication via text is heavily dependent on question asking, self disclosure and computer literacy. Internet experience has been predicted to increase disclosure and information-seeking behavior in the e-commerce context (Metzger, 2007). For example, users who encounter inaccurate information from the websites they visit may be more aware of the need to verify the credibility of online information and thus be prompted to construct a strategy of double-checking information using multiple websites. On the other hand, a user who has limited knowledge of online tools experiences higher uncertainty levels.

An active strategy example used online would be relying on the target's social networks as information sources. Asking direct questions and self-disclosure are more common in CMC than active or passive strategies, which are more difficult to perform due to the lack of common acquaintances and lack of opportunity for advanced planning of interaction space (Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

Individuals engage in direct information seeking when they anticipate desirable information, they avoid direct information seeking when they anticipate undesirable information (Knobloch, 2002). On the other hand, disclosures commonly occur when the other is perceived to be trustworthy or when the "discloser expects he will benefit in some way if he permits the other person to know him as he is" (Jourard, 1971, p. 65) linking self disclosure to incentive value.

Additionally, Tidwell and Walther (2002) and Whalter and Burgoon (1992) found that self-disclosure between online partners in initial interactions leads to greater perceived interpersonal attractions and liking, also consistent with URT. Furthermore Knoblock (2002) exclaims that relationship uncertainty involves four content areas: norms for appropriate behavior within the relationship, mutuality of feelings between partners, the definition of the association, and the future of the relationship.

Gudykunst and colleagues (1983, 1985a, 1985b; Gudykunst, Chua & Gray, 1987; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988; Gudykunst and Nishida, 1984, 1986) have demonstrated that the uncertainty reduction process varies considerably across cultures. Understanding the cultural differences in the relationship between uncertainty reduction and positive communication outcomes would be an initial step toward achieving cultural communication competence and further development of an integrative theory.

The couchsurfing project bridges through computer mediated communication people from different cultures, this thesis focus on the variation of the uncertainty reduction processes.

Culture

There are several cultures involved in this paper, backpacking culture, European culture, American Culture, Brazilian Culture, Christian culture. Evidently, the way people see, perceive, interpret, and understand the world around them has been filtered by complex cognitive filtering devices and one of these is something known as "culture."

Geertz (1973, p.4-5) mentions that Kluckhohn defines culture as: "(1) the total way of life of people; (2) the social legacy the individual acquires from his group; (3) a way of thinking, feeling and believing; (4) an abstraction from behavior; (5) an anthropological theory about the

way in which a group of people in fact behave; (6) a store house of pooled learning; (7) a set of

standardized orientations to recurrent problems; (8) learned behavior; (9) a mechanism for the

normative regulation of behavior; (10) a set of techniques for adjusting both the external

environment to the other men; and (11) a precipitate of history.

Cohen (1973) emphasizes the nature of drifting as a counter-culture associated with drug

consumption and a departure from conventional ways of life. Cohen also classified tourists'

experiences based on their relationship to their societies suggesting five modes of tourist

experiences characterized by the meanings assigned by them to both the "center" of their own

societies in everyday life and their quest for "centers" of other cultures during their excursions.

Recreational mode is associated with entertaining, but shallow activities. Diversionary

mode is for people alienated from the "center" of their own society and looking for escape.

Experimental mode is for those who do try out the authentic life of "others;" while existential

mode individuals already committed to an "elective center" external to their own society.

Since Couchsurfers fit the description, this study intends to focus solely on the drifter

category described by Cohen. Shaffer (2004) describes the backpacking approach as an extended

graduation party where recent college graduates could meet others like themselves in exotic

locales. This interpersonal goal, meeting others like themselves, seemed to be the priority; the

locale is only functioning as a backdrop for the experience. In contrast, Boorstin (1964) asserts

that tourism is a shallow, trivial 'pseudo-event'.

In response to Boorstin, MacCannell (1976) argued that tourists are not looking for

superficial, contrived experiences, but are really in search of authentic events and occurrences.

Most of the existing research about backpacking, alternative tourism, and couchsurfing focuses on the authenticity of the relationships formed and trust level of such relationships.

Conclusion

This review has briefly looked at Uncertainty Reduction Theory and some of its strategies for offline and online communication and what motivates people to engage in meaningful information exchange and self-disclosure. The review also briefly overlooked how online interaction limits the strategies and some of the ways interactants have found to remedy those limitations and increase trust.

There are several obstacles to uncertainty reduction online and risks in engaging in online interaction yet couchsurfers continue to travel, host, and meet people around the world and in cultures different than their own, experiencing different levels of authentic and alternative tourism. This literature review is not extensive but revealed that knowledge about how couchsurfers and uncertainty reduction is limited and most literature found relative to the topic focus on the authenticity of the tourism experience and trust formation on online and dating relationships.

The amount of research about cross-culture communication or uncertainty reduction is next to none. Another interesting research would be the extent that people manage or cultivate their online personas and how this influences trust formation. For the purpose of this study uncertainty reduction among couchsurfers is the focus of this thesis.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Autoethnography research methods vary greatly. One consistent aspects of autoethnographic research is the use of first-person narrative. The personal, subjective nature of the method is both a strength and a weakness. This chapter will provide a brief overview of the methodology as well as explore the key issues of reflexivity and voice and first person narrative.

Authoethnography Research Methods

Autoethnography is a part of the ethnographical way of exploration of a research topic, it considers data from observations, field texts and my personal analysis in regards to culture, behaviors, experiences as primary data. "[A]utoethnoraphers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)" and that "[d]ifferent exemplars of autoethnography fall at different places along the continuum of each of these three axes" (Ellis & Bochner , p. 740)

Autoethnography is a postmodern research method, which allows the ways of inquiry to connect with real people, their lives, and their issues. While defending autoethnography as compared to traditional ways of inquiry, Wall says, "the growing emphasis on the power of research to change the world creates a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned." (p.148) Autoethnography also differs from other research methods in the way data is acquired. "Since the term "data" has been traditionally associated with quantitative research inquiries and autoethnographers

accumulate voluminous texts as multiple data collection activities progress, the term "field texts"

is justifiably adopted as an alternative to 'data.'" (Chang, p.5)

Autoethnography stood out as one of the ways to best present information about a subject

and the most appropriate for this research because of the ability to include myself as part of the

research besides being the observer. "Benefits of autoethnography lie in three areas: (1) it offers

a research method friendly to researchers and readers; (2) it enhances cultural understanding of

self and others; and (3) it has a potential to transform self and others toward the cross-cultural

coalition building." (Chang, p.11).

Personal narrative or life history, testimonial narrative, critical ethnography, reflexive

ethnography are a part of the autoethnographical research methods and came about as the result

of the resistance to the domination of traditional academics mounted by scholars in disciplines,

such as literary criticism, language studies, postcolonial studies and multicultural studies. In the

past three decades, the scientific community has regarded these research methods as unreliable

tools to generate (scientifically acceptable) truth and knowledge (Sariyant, 2000).

Autoethnographical methodology and methods began to gain their momentum of

recognition around the mid 1970s and to receive a warm welcome among academia's from

various disciplines around the early 1980s (Moss, 2001; Ellis & Bochner 2000; Cosslet, Lury &

Summerfield 2000). Autoethnography methods encourage researchers not to hide their bias

behind the shield of methodological neutrality but make themselves and their position apparent

in the research text.

Ellis and Bochner talk about how there is no clearly defined boundary to distinguish what

should be counted as an auto/ethnography because "the meanings and the applications of

autoethnography have evolved in a manner that make precise definition and application difficult.

(739). However, they also say that autoethnography has become a "researcher's choice in

describing studies and procedures that connect personal to cultural." (739) A wide range of

research methods could fit under the umbrella of auto/ethnographical methodology. Personal

narrative, biographical narrative, testimonial, testimonial narrative or testimony, life history,

autobiography, reflexive ethnography and feminist ethnography are examples (Dezin & Lincoln,

2000).

One similar feature of all autoethnography methods is that they involve using personal

experience and the researcher's voice as means to claim authority for producing knowledge as

well as for interpreting and portraying social phenomena in relation to personal experience. The

main focus of an autoethnographic work is self within culture and the way that culture defines an

experience and a sense of self.

Narrating (life) stories is an active process in which "personal accounts [of storytellers]

are built up from experience, differentially combined, and actively cast into preferred

vocabularies" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p.103-4). The narrator, then, is a member of the group

speaking as an authoritative representative to publicly declare and thereby disclose specific

exigencies of that group (Jarratt, p.124). Autoethnography is not a polished formula and there

are other ways which the data could be analyzed, but this one provides the most features that can

best represent the data. Criticism and validity of this method is further discussed in future

paragraphs.

Reflexivity and Voice

As mentioned previously the researcher is a part of the data gathering process and an important part of capturing the ethnography aspect of the method. Therefore the use of first person in this paper will represent my personal voice. It is suggested that the freedom of a researcher to speak as a player in a research project and to mingle his or her experience with the experience of those studied is precisely what is needed to move inquiry and knowledge further along. (Wall, p.148) This non-conventional method is part of what makes autoethnography a postmodern method of inquiry, and one of the areas of criticism of the research method.

Autoethnography also challenges traditional writing conventions that attempt to validate empirical science and uphold the power that accompanies scientific knowledge. In the traditional paradigm, research that has been conducted according to established methods must also be reported in a standardized format. (Wall, p. 149). Ellis (1991), a strong advocate emotion-based, autobiographical inquiry, has suggested that a social scientist who has lived through an experience and has consuming, unanswered questions about it can use introspection as a data source and, following accepted practices of field research, study him- or herself as with any "n" of 1. "Experimental writing means re-thinking the condition of representation and therefore [engaging] with figures of subjectivity that do not depend on representation as it has been understood" (Clough, 2000, p. 286).

In autoethnography research themes a span of analytical themes seemed common, they are: identity construction and dramaturgical enactment; body, emotions, and 'knowledge in action'; race, class, and gender; and methodological critique and representational strategies. Identity construction and dramaturgical enactment can be seen when Di Domenico and Lynch (2007) describe the creation of romanticized hospitality and 'homely comfort' in commercial bed

and breakfast homes through the presentation of domestic icons, the creation of front and backstage spaces, and spatial management norms and strategies.

Some authors use autoethnography to interrogate the social psychological dynamics of desire, providing up-close descriptions that frequently challenge current conceptions. For instance, Fullagar (2002) uses her extensive travel diaries as the grounds for a heavily theorized deconstructive reading of trajectories of desire that contests Rojek's (1993) and others' more deterministic approaches to leisure and travel.

Another way autoethnography has been used is as a representation of race, class and gender. Anderson and Austin (2012) state that gender-focused autoethnographies authored by women invoke complex and nuanced personal experiences to gain deeper insights into the social construction of feminine subjectivity, typically critiquing popular culture portrayals of femininity and conventional academic conceptions.

Besides the fact that I have been through the process and has collected the necessary data to analyze, by using first person descriptions this conveys the message that couchsurfers have something to say and contribute, couchsurfers have a voice. "For many, especially for women being educated as researchers, voice is an acknowledgment that they have something to say" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 423). Couchsurfing empowers travelers to explore the world beyond their backyard and learn sharing and respecting while breaking communication barriers, similar characteristics are found in the autoethnographical method of research which empowers me to provide an insider look into a research topic. Different people learn different ways and there is beauty and harmony when the different parts of a whole come together and

share a purpose, autoethnography allows people who learn through unconventional ways to express themselves, just like couchsurfing.org.

First Person Narrative

Humans acquire knowledge through experience. Educated humans are able to record such occurrences and share with others who partake in the knowledge and expand on it using their personal experiences. While not all autoethnographical research is richly descriptive, the genre of research and writing benefits from the placement of the author as a first-person narrator and analytical protagonist throughout the text or in anecdotal moments. (Anderson & Austin, 2012) This research takes the postmodern view of truth and does not attempt to show it as a single truth but as an interpretation of the truth that others can elaborate upon.

I want people to arrive at their own conclusions based on an experience and a look behind the scenes of something some consider scary because of ignorance about the subject. Anderson, a cultural anthropologist and autoethnographic theorist, is highly invested in the fidelity of the autoethnographic genre. He says that "autoethnographers must assiduously pursue other insiders' interpretations, attitudes, and feelings as well as their own" (Anderson, p.389). In other words, analytic "reflexivity involves an awareness of reciprocal influence between ethnographers and their settings and informants" (Anderson, p.382), or "mutual informativity" (Anderson, p.383). Thus, "the autoethnographer's understandings, both as a member and a researcher, emerge not from detached discovery but from engaged dialogue" with other members (Anderson, p.382).

Autoethnographers are interested in exploring how people learn or understand the social world rather than what they know. Thus, they pay attention to how culture comes to play the role in this process of knowing and understanding. Kirby and McKenna (1989 , p. 64) claim that

"choosing a method for a piece of research is a political choice. When you choose a certain method you adopt a particular way of seeing and constructing the world which may prevent you from knowing it another way." Communication is metaphorically the door and bridge that allows travelers to experience a culture different than their own, and their observation of the world they immerse themselves in provides valuable data for autoethnography.

One of the best examples of the importance of autoethnography is seen in the historical texts of many of the explorers and colonizers about exotic lands where they traveled. In Brazil, my country of citizenship, Pêro Vaz de Caminha, a secretary to the Portuguese royal court during the 1500s wrote a letter reporting to the king the findings of the new land Portugal was preparing to colonize. In his letter, Pêro wrote as an autoethnographer bridging the Portuguese culture with a new land which he called his own, his letter is considered the birth certificate of Brazil. (Dias, 1992)

This project does not have intentions to create new couchsurfers or advertise its safety or other values, instead it will analyze the values of couchsufing through the lens of autoethnography and uncertainty reduction. By writing in first person narrative I want to encourage readers to understand the perspective of a couchsurfer and the adaptation that needs to take place as uncertainty is reduced. Schwandt (2000, p.195) quotes Bernstein (1983), Taylor (1991), and Grodin (1994) to suggest that "only in a dialogue encounter with what is not understood, with what is alien, with what makes a claim upon us, can we open ourselves to risking and testing our preconceptions and prejudices." While talking about the importance of ethnographies Bochner (1996) says, "Ethnography should broaden our horizons, awaken our

capacity to care about people different from us, help us know how to converse with them, feel connected."

Carolyn Ellis (Ellis & Bochner, 1996) says, "Ethnographers inscribe patterns of cultural experience; they give perspective on life. They interact, they take notes, they photograph, moralize, and write. ... [they] eventually turn toward some form of cultural analysis" (p. 16). Narratives or stories of personal experiences, especially in a written form, enable audiences and readers to feel engaged with the narrator or the writer and the text and to see the connection between the text and real life experience.

Data analysis typically involves description, interpretation, and analysis of interpretation (Patton, p.371). Simply put, as Sariyant (2000) says   "ethnographic researchers examine a group's observable and learned patterns of behavior, customs, and ways of life, providing a high level of ecological validity or accuracy due to the research being done in lived (naturalistic) rather than laboratory contexts."

Data collection and analysis

From May to August of 2012, I traveled through 5 countries in Western Europe; England, France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. During this trip I visited over 12 different cities and couchsurfed with over 20 different hosts, with several other interactions with couchsurfers and locals in the household. I kept one personal journal and personal reflections about my life as well as the experience, expenses, and a list of what the hosts recommended I read, eat, listen to and do while visiting their country. This notebook contains names and addresses of each host, information that was not shared to the public through the open blog. I recorded incidents and some paragraphs from books that impacted my thoughts and feelings. These data rich documents

along with the virtual interaction I had with the couchsurfers will be the data used for this research.

Field Texts

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) concur that field texts "help fill in the richness, nuance, and complexity of the landscape, returning the reflecting researcher to a richer, more complex, and puzzling landscape than memory alone is likely to construct" (p. 83). In the same way, Rodriguez and Ryave (2002) argue that self-observation as a data collection technique is useful because it gives access to "covert, elusive, and/or personal experiences like cognitive processes, emotions, motives, concealed actions, omitted actions, and socially restricted activities" (p. 3). Marshall and Rossman (1999) identify inquiry journal records, letters, autobiographical writing, email messages and so on as data resources.

Several public blog posts were written during the trip with information about the city, its habitants, and my impression of it as a Christian. In these texts, such concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought and language" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739).

To assist with the layout and structure of this autoethnography format, Maslow's hierarchy of needs is used to categorize the couchsurfing values by associating them with the basic needs and elaborating on what Maslow said was necessary to establish a satisfactory communication.

Although this study is an autoethnography, which to an extent is always obtrusive, I respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the couchsurfers who willingly opened the doors to host him. The confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.

Safeguards

The following safeguards will be employed to protect the rights of the couchsurfers involved in this study: 1) The names of couchsurfers will not be revealed 2) No couchsurfing profiles information which could determine the location or identity of the couchsurfer will be displayed. 3) The couchsurfer's rights, interests, and wishes will be considered first when choices are made regarding reporting the data.

The Process

A friend friend from Los Angeles was the one to introduce me to couchsurfing. The conversation came up when I asked about his other Brazilian friend and how they had met. That same day I went online and created my account. A few months later when I had to leave the United States because my student visa was expiring the idea of traveling through Europe came to me. I investigated the cost and debated about couchsurfing. When purchasing the 50L backpack that would contain all my belongings for the trip I talked to a sales person who was a couchsurfer. He asked me what I needed the backpack for and I explained my trip and how I was debating hostels or couchsurfing. Besides selling me the backpack the sales person and couchsurfing ambassador sold me into couchsurfing. He was the first recommendation I received in my profile.

The other references came from friends willing to help but because they were so few they were not very helpful. The first host I had, in London, helped me because she was gracious and wanted to practice her Portuguese. I was unable to find a host in London besides her and she allowed me to stay in her place for two weeks. After that experience in London, and receiving her recommendation it became easier to find hosts. I received 30 positive recommendations from couchsurfers and each of them has a story about how we met and how uncertainty was reduced, even when I was unable to speak their language and vice-versa.

Funding

In order to find hosts, I sent many requests and enjoyed a great deal of online interaction. Funding for the research came from crowdsourcing and asking my friends over a period of two months. The calculated total cost of the trip was three thousand dollars completely covered through fundraising. Such efforts of time, money, and relationship development have already been made and the data has been collected, which facilitates the autoethnography.

This research has also been written, as the data was gathered, through an extended stay in the United States of America other than my country of citizenship, Brazil, under a student visa which gives me a deadline for completion of my studies. The last step for the completion of such studies is the successful writing and defense of this thesis project, which so much has been invested.

Validity and Criticism

As with any method of research there are several criticisms and contributions attributed to autoethnography. They could be divided into four groups; criticisms could be categorized as

(1) issues with the data and (2) emotional involvement, while contributions are (3) unique and (4) engaging research.

The first contribution of autoethnography is that through the lens of autoethnography I have the unique opportunity to document views that otherwise would not have a voice to represent them. For instance, Howe uses a reflexive ethnographical vignette of a night he spent drinking and socializing at a pub to illustrate the unique insights into public leisure activities that can be gained by impaired or disabled auto-ethnographical researchers (2009, p. 494). In the same manner, De Garis (1999) utilizes his unique experience, as both a professional wrestler who has been the subject of ethnographical research and an ethnographer himself, to make the case for the need for sensual engagement and physical contact by researchers in order to grasp the meaning and experience of pro-wrestling and other intensely sensual activities.

Another contribution of autoethnography in leisure research is that it creates unique opportunities for rich, vibrant, often playful, and engaging writing. In this respect, autoethnography represents an extension of the ethnographical impulse toward 'thick description' (Gertz, 1973). While there is potential to become emotionally involved with the research, the benefits exceed the limitations of this research method when it comes to telling the study of couchsurfers.

The knowledge produced by autoethnography has been criticized as non-objective, emotive, fictitious, and unreliable information. Critics of scientific traditions have argued for the abandonment of rationality, objectivity, and truth to move social science beyond a focus on method, toward the power of social research to have a moral effect (Bochner, 2001). The couchsurfing philosophy is one that discourages freeloaders and people who are simply looking

for a place to sleep, couchsurfers are people who want to experience a culture in its fullest. "To

understand any social practice - say, empowerment for social change - one must therefore view

and understand individuals through their social relations and connections" (Kemmis &

McTaggart, 2000, p.581). In the same manner, couchsurfing needs to be experienced in order to

be understood, specially since it is not just a place to sleep, but a culture. During 2012 the

couchsurfing website reported there were more than 20 million couchsurfing experiences

worldwide (See Appendix B1).

Another criticism often faced by autoethnographies is in regards to what constitutes data,

the role of personal data and collective memory in ethnographical practices and how researchers

can acknowledge and incorporate reflective awareness of their subject positions into their

understanding of their data. Autoethnographical texts allow a variety of representation formats,

technologies and materials that make the collaborative relationship and engagement between the

subject, the researcher and the audience possible.

Researching into one's personal experience and ones self alone is inadequate, to know

myself better and to understand my experience farther or deeper, I must understand from

different perspectives of different people. Therefore this study will also take into account the

research done by others and keep accountability about the information used in the research while

being aware of the potential for bias.

CHAPTER 4

Results

"I can't think of anything that excites a greater sense of childlike wonder than to be in a country where you are ignorant of almost everything. Suddenly you are five years old again. You can't read anything, you have only the most rudimentary sense of how things work, you can't even reliably cross a street without endangering your life. Your whole existence becomes a series of interesting guesses."

-- Bill Bryson, *("Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe.",*
Travel.CNN.com, August 20, 2012)

This chapter will consist of the field data created during my 3-month sojourn couchsurfing in Europe. Specifically, the field data includes posts from my online blog, entries from my personal journals, photographs and reflections.In order to explain my couch surfing experience and provide some structure for this chapter, I will organize my field data based upon some of the core values of couchsurfing. These values can be easily understood in terms of human needs. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be loosely applied in order to understand the five key themes: (1) Safety, (2) Language, (3) Community, (4) Values and religion, (5) Culture. These themes are associated with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs from the most to least essential need. (1) Safety relates to Maslow's physiological and security needs; (2) Language and (3) community encompass love and belonging needs. (4) Values and religion are associated with self-esteem needs and lastly (5) Culture theme will represent self actualization needs.

Throughout this chapter these five themes as well as their relationship to uncertainty reduction strategies will be analyzed based on researcher's couchsurfing experience in the year 2012. Blog posts and journal entries that relate to the five themes will be included as primary

field research data. Furthermore, the five themes will be divided into subtopics. The subtopics

are the explanation of the conceptualization and operationalization of each theme.

"Conceptualization is the refinement and specification of abstract concepts, and

operationalization is the development of specific research procedures (operations) that will result

in empirical observations representing those concepts in the real world." (Babbie, 2012 , p. 133).

Putting this in to the perspective of this study, the five couchsurfing themes will be used

as the concepts, and the uncertainty reduction strategies implemented during this trip will be

considered operationalization.

Safety

When the question of safety arises, it is often wondered what effect a particular activity

will have on one's self, to others and to property. Does it pose little to no risk of injuries? Could

it lead to death? The nominal definition of safety varies depending on the context used or

individual involved. To a certain extent, the very act of simply crossing the street may be unsafe,

if traffic regulations are not respected. With regards to couchsurfing in particular, a non-

member's primary concern is that of the safety of the process.To an adventuresome individual,

jumping off of a bridge or airplane with a string attached to the ankle or a parachute tied to a

backpack is considered safe. Someone recovering from surgery may find difficulty going down a

steep staircase and consider it unsafe.

With regards to Maslow's hierarchy, the needs of an individual succeed from level to

level. Unless the first level of needs is fully satisfied, the second level of needs may not be

considered or addressed. Similarly, unless the second level of needs is fully satisfied, the third

level of needs do not come in to play. Physiological needs are given utmost importance followed

by safety needs. When all physiological needs are satisfied and are no longer controlling

thoughts and behaviors, the needs for security can become active. "Adults have little awareness

of their security needs except in times of emergency or periods of disorganization in the social

structure (such as widespread rioting). Children often display the signs of insecurity and the need

to be safe" (Simons, 1987). Couchsurfers are concerned about safety with regards to scenarios

such as theft, physical harm, sexual advancements and life threatening events.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, safety can be perceived many different ways,

However for the purpose of this study the dimensions of safety will be limited to the interactions

between the host and surfer, the surfers traveling together and between surfers staying with the

same host. The variables that will be used to operationalize and measure safety will be the

number of couchsurfing hosts and the number of negative experiences.

As part of the process of uncertainty reduction and evaluation of safety risks when

staying with another surfer, there were some precautions that I took. The couchsurfing website

lists the following precautions for surfers: Trust your instincts, be informed about the culture

where you are traveling, communicate through couchsurfing and do not give out your number or

email address, review profiles carefully, know your limits and enjoy responsibly, have a backup

plan, leave feedback and report abuse or negative experiences to couchsurfing. (2014, October

1). Retrieved from https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/safety. The website goes on to provide a link

where surfers can confidentially report negative experiences.

When the results of a host search within a city would populate, I would search for the

hosts with the most references and with little to no negative references. Some of the references

were brief and vague while others were detailed. I then spent some time reading what other

surfers had said about the hosts and after that examine the profile of the host and find things we

had in common. Taking into consideration any experience with the Brazilian culture either by

hosting someone from Brazil or traveling to Brazil. By learning that the host had had previous

contact with Brazilian couchsurfers I was able to measure the interaction of that host based on

the reference left by the Brazilian couchsurfers.

I would also take into consideration the gender of the host and the number of people from

the opposite sex hosted. Likewise, if the host was homosexual the number of same sex guests

hosted and what their references had to say about the host. Another safety factor when searching

for a host was the level of education the host had published on his or her profile and the level of

language the host used when replying to the couch request. This was an indication of the host's

social standing. If their language was clean and polite, I would gather that they did not belong to
any gang of sorts.
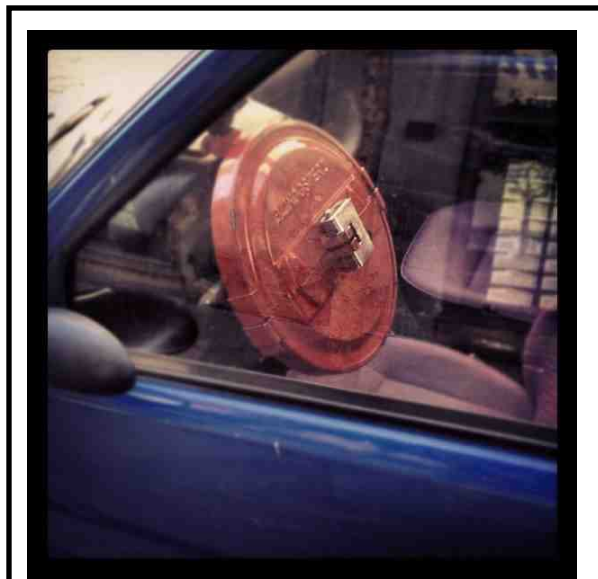
A heavy cast iron steering wheel lock
protects against theft.
Padova - Italy
July, 12, 2012
Photography by: Anderson Santos

Lastly, the income of a host was also something to taken into consideration since economically depressed living places have the highest crime rates. This was not something observable until meeting them and visited where they live. When reading about the issue of trust among online communities I came across an article which summarized very well the process that allows trust among couchsurfers to grow in such a short period of

time. Luhmann (1979) primarily viewed trust as a mechanism to help reduce the complexities

and uncertainties of daily life because when humans are faced with uncertainty or too many

possibilities, indecisiveness or inaction will tend to result. Thus, Luhmann believed that when we

trust, "one engages in an action as though there were only certain possibilities in the

future" (Luhmann, 1979, p.20)

      While in Naples, Italy, I noticed that one of the hosting places seemed very deprived; the

streets had no light or sidewalk, the doors and walls of the building appeared run down and the

look of the people around the area seemed economically depressed. The host in that city warned

me to be careful when walking alone around Naples to conceal valuables so as to avoid attracting

the attention of thieves.

      The night I arrived in Naples, I looked out the balcony of my host's house and noticed

fireworks.They seemed to have gone off close to the house and when I asked my host about

them, he just said that his neighbors were very festive people. At the next couchsurfing location,

a few miles South of Naples in Torre del Greco, I mentioned the fireworks to my hosts and my

impressions of Naples. They asked me the address of the place I was staying at. They told me I

was staying in one of the most dangerous areas of Naples, and the fireworks also meant that a

new shipment of drugs or guns had arrived for the organized crime groups that operate around

that area.The organized crime in Naples uses fireworks to communicate with the various cells of

the group about the presence of police.

      In May of 2012, Vanity Fair published an extensive article about the organized crime in

Naples. This informational piece described in great detail the crime activity in Camorra, the

neighborhood I stayed at while in Naples.

The Camorra is not an organization like the Mafia that can be separated from society, disciplined in court, or even quite defined. It is an amorphous grouping in Naples and its hinterlands of more than 100 autonomous clans and perhaps 10,000 immediate associates, along with a much larger population of dependents, clients, and friends. It is an understanding, a way of justice, a means of creating wealth and spreading it around. It has been a part of life in Naples for centuries—far longer than the fragile construct called Italy has even existed. (The Camorra never sleeps, P. 1)

Over several pages, the article describes scenes much like the ones portrayed in the famous Hollywood's mafia trilogy, The Godfather. The article and the films describe how the gang lord's extorted money, executed debtors, and exported drugs all over the world.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, safety is relative to the perception and knowledge of each individual. At no time in Naples I felt threatened by the crowd around me or had anything harmful happen to me. Not to mention I took precautions to prevent anything harmful that from happening. However, there was a scary event that occurred during the couchsurfing experience that, was not published on the blog. This is because I did not want to startle the readers and unnecessarily raise their uncertainty about couchsurfing.

My host turned out to be a crazy host, he drank too much the first night and got into a fight with a fellow surfer while cooking eggs. The second night we went to his neighbor on the first floor, who was an older man, a vegetarian who has medical problems and lives with a nice Chinese woman. My host had a fight with her and it made it very hard to talk to the neighbor because my host kept interrupting. At one point he started talking about suicide and the fellow surfer became upset and talked about how my host doesn't

know what goes on the head of a person struggling with suicide and shouldn't talk about

it, my host offered to kill the fellow surfer so there would be no thought about suicide. I

thought that was enough and told them I was going to sleep...When we came back

upstairs, my host started talking about how many weapons and knives he had and how

someone was making phone calls threatening to kill him. My host played loud music and

when the fellow surfer and I decided to go to sleep they started banging on something

very loud outside my locked bedroom door. (Personal Journal entry July 5th, 2012).

 Because this host had access to my blog and has commented on posts before I arrived at

the house I was afraid of leaving a negative review. Instead, I left him a new testament Bible.

This was the only scary situation during the trip and it was the first surfing experience for my

fellow couchsurfer. Needless to say, it was also the last experience.

My hosts were usually very caring and used a map to show me the areas of the city which

I should avoid or they would point out the areas when walking together.

It was a few minutes after midnight when I arrived in Madrid and met my host. He

convinced me to ride his scooter with him around downtown where there would be less

people than during the day time and the weather would be more pleasant. There were

janitors cleaning and washing the streets, and the smell of the water on the hot black

asphalt and old stones that make the streets and Plazas smelled like fresh rain. The

glistening water meeting these old surfaces created a picturesque scene with the desert

monuments and streets. There were still plenty of people walking and drinking on the

streets but far fewer than during the daytime. We also saw prostitutes smoking and

drinking close to the Gran Via, but unlike the French ones they seemed to just wait for the

men to talk to them. I don't need to remind you that this is still an area of the world

where human trafficking is a problem and many of these prostitutes looked foreign.

(Santos, 2012p).

One of the websites researched before beginning the European trip recommended

keeping a copy of all your documents, tickets, and reserve cash in a secure location. As a

backpacker with all my possessions inside of my backpack the options for secure locations were

limited. During the three month long trip, I chose to wear a ziploc plastic bag tucked beside my

thigh with the help of compression shorts containing a copy of important documents as well as

my reserve money. This plastic bag never left my side and many times I slept wearing it until I

felt the host could be trusted not to search my luggage.

> I have been told so many times that Italy is a dangerous place filled with pickpockets, I
>
> believe I am getting paranoid. So far only senior citizens have surrounded me. I look at
>
> the old ladies with a crooked eye and I am ready to slap her hand if she tries to touch me.
>
> I wonder how much of Italy's fame came from careless, stereotypical, brainless tourists,
>
> but I am unwilling to find out. So that is definitely something you can pray for. That I
>
> will be able to close both eyes and rest while I am sleeping and that no old or young lady
>
> will have their slippery hands in my pockets. (Santos, 2012f).

Another feature of the crash package I carried in my underwear was a list of telephone

numbers and addresses of Brazilian embassies in each of the countries I was planning to visit.

Along with the telephone numbers of the local police, interpol, and credit card companies. I

never used any of that information. Of the 22 unique couchsurfing experiences, only two raised

uncertainty and concern for safety. While 31 positive references were received, no negative

references were received or given.

Of all the couchsurfing experiences there was only one which I felt uncomfortable and

told the host I could not stay. It was in Lisbon, Portugal. I arrived by train on August 12, 2012

and had to catch a ferry boat and 2 busses to arrive at this host's house. We had planned to meet

in the morning and I was late. When I finally found the house I learned that my host had recently

woke up. He invited me come inside while he finished getting ready. I sat on the couch and

looked around the house at the many statuettes of demons and other goth looking sculptures. The

house was not very clean and my instincts were telling me to leave. I feared it would be rude of

me to do so but ultimately I decided it was best. Without staying 30 minutes in the house I told

my host I was not going to be able to stay and found my way to a hostel in Lisbon, fortunately

Portugal has been rated among the best hostels in the European continent in a world wide yearly

award by hostelworld.com called hoscars where the staff cooks and entertains backpacking guest

as well as a reputable hotel.

Language

Besides the original fear of death or life threatening situations, the common curiosity of

people when a conversation about couchsurfing comes up is the language barriers. While the

subject provides many interesting experiences, it makes some people uneasy, specially those who

have difficulty comprehending another culture or language. Since the couchsurfing website is

available in worldwide to 9 million users there are several users who are unable to communicate

in another language aside from their nature tongue which may or may not necessarily be English.

The couchsurfing website is developed in English and the option to translate it to another

language does not exist. Therefore some understanding of English must exist to create an account and communicate with other users. For the purpose of this study, language will be conceptualized against Maslow's hierarchy as a part of the second level of needs - love and belonging - and how they relate to the uncertainty reduction strategies.

Couchsurfers are classified under Cohen's drifter travelers as backpackers with limited budget who avoid expenses of a trip, use public transportation and eat locally, often homecooked meals provided by the couchsurfing host. As a consequence of such budget restrictions, a translator or tour guide is not something couchsurfers use to communicate with their hosts or other locals. On the other hand, a host will often act as a translator or guide allowing more interaction with other residents. In my personal experience, language was not an issue most of the time.

Having been born in Brazil, I grew up speaking Portuguese, and spent years studying English, Spanish, and French. Each of these languages, other than English, is a Romance language with similar Latin root words. Italian is another language that that shared its root with Latin and is a Romance language.

When deciding where to travel alone by train in Europe, I discovered an option that fit my budget. A train ticket called Eurail that allowed me to travel to four different countries. The United Kingdom was another country visited, but including the U.K. on the Eurail ticket would increase the price by €100. On the other hand, by taking a bus from London to France during the day would only cost €10.

Along with the United Kingdom, the four countries I chose to visit were France, Italy, Spain and Portugal. Having minored in French, I was more excited than nervous about the

To let means to rent - London,
England
May 29, 2012
Photography by: Anderson Santos

opportunity to put my knowledge to the test. Nevertheless, I did carry a dictionary with me on my phone. Surprisingly, I was able to understand and converse with native French speakers without the aid of the dictionary. On several occasions I went shopping alone and even engaged in conversations with strangers. Italy was the most challenging country to communicate without the help of any aid. Thankfully, internet was available and with Google translate loaded on my phone, allowed me to have dinner with my host's neighbor more than once. They did not speak English and yet we were able to communicate and understand each, with my host's help. He knew some English.

I discovered that one of the reasons many hosts accepted my couch request and wanted to spend more time dialoging with me was for an opportunity to practice their English or Portuguese knowledge language skills.

It is often very difficult for a couchsurfer to find the first host when his/her profile does not have any references of experiences traveling or meeting other couchsurfers, such was the case with my profile before arriving in London. Larger cities have more couchsurfing hosts, but it was also very competitive to find a host who did not already have a guest during the summer. This is also because that particular summer, London was hosting the Olympics. My first host was a woman from Iceland who lived in a city one hour away from London by train, in a college

town, with seven other theater students from Spain, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. She

couchsurfed in Brazil and loved the culture. She wanted to practice her Portuguese. Because

many hosts already had other couchsurfers and because of the lack of references in my profile, I

was unable to find other hosts in London and stayed with my first host for two weeks while the

average length of a couchsurfing stay is three to four days.

Spain presented no challenges in communication but something intriguing did happen

during the first few days. While spending a month in Italy, I decided to try to learn a little Italian.

Then in Spain, my brain behaved as if it was stuck in the most recently practiced language and

my Spanish speaking often came out with a blend of Italian that caused many laughs and

inquisitive looks from hosts and others. Since Portugal was the country that colonized Brazil,

Portuguese was not a challenge to speak either. It was the most interesting thing to observe how

the language had changed so much from where it originated. Words used in the colloquially

Portuguese spoken in Portugal today are considered vulgar in Brazil while many Brazilian

Portuguese words adapted from the Indian natives of Brazil, the French, and the Spanish

conquistadores are non-existent in Portugal.

Community

There are so many ways to group people under a category. Some are self-labeled and are

proud of belonging to a group; while others would rather not be associated with a particular

group although they possess all the characteristics of said group. Nominally, communities would

be a group of individuals, of any size, that share the same values or beliefs. Individuals can

belong to several communities at once; I am a part of the international student community by

being enrolled in a university of a country other than the one I have citizenship in. I am also a part of the couchsurfing community, which expands on and offline.

While some people are a part of communities that only exist in the virtual world, this is something that is very popular among gamers. Because of the communication and sharing of beliefs, developing relationships is significantly easier within a community. That said, there are also many barriers and misconceptions that can get in the way.

The dimensions of community which will be discussed in this thesis are only those that are related to couchsurfing, either online or offline. Communication and technologies facilitate the self-organizing of virtual communities into collectives, allowing voluntary participants to gain a sense of belonging and meet others who are geographically dispersed. (Gilchrist, 2004; Sohn and Leckenby, 2007). Another capability the couchsurfing website possesses, and is greatly used, is the ability to dialogue in a forum. Often offering tips and attractions to fellow couchsurfers. These are much better than any traveling guide book or tourism website, locals of a community invite surfers to participate in gatherings that are not often advertised on the mainstream channels.

Aside from announcements, another

A metaphorical representation of couchsurfing ,
This street art can be seen in any of those streets but the alignment was brought to the attention of the researcher through interaction with a host.
Paris, France
June 12, 2012
Photography by: Anderson Santos

function of the blog is the interactions and discussions generated. There are several groups with

moderators and the topics vary from Anglicans to filmmakers, tattoo artists and queer

couchsurfers.

> I have been staying several days or sometimes just one night with incredible people
>
> whom I feel privileged to be able to talk to. Most of them are among my age group with
>
> ages between 20-38 years old. They have traveled the world. Through discussing their
>
> stories and looking at their pictures, I am encouraged and my thirst for adventure and
>
> travel increases. I also find that they are very intelligent people. They often read, love art,
>
> possess great musical taste, and speak several languages. They are very hospitable and
>
> depending on their work they are even able to take the time to walk around the city with
>
> me (Santos, 2012g).

One of the hosts I met in Portugal left the country soon after my visit and went on an

excursion traveling the world. This is something very common in the couchsurfing world.
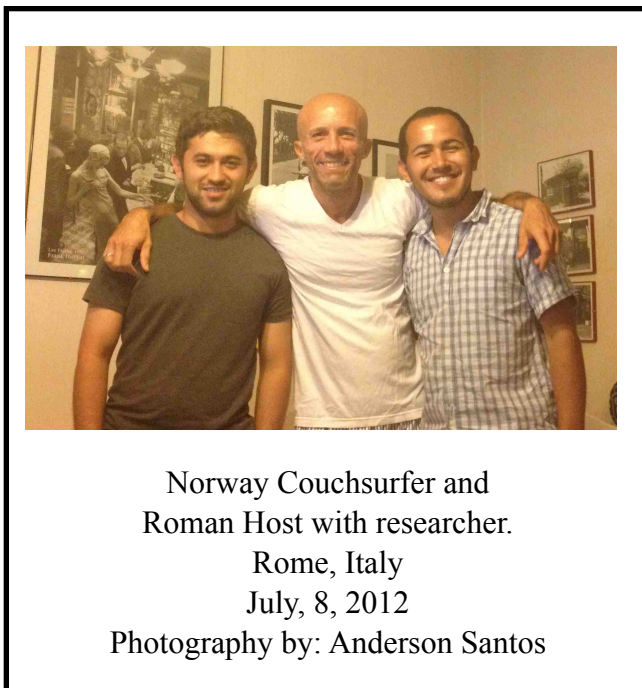
> There is a lot more I could write about the culture and curiosities of the language, but the
>
> lack of time and the length of the post keep me from doing so. There is another
>
> couchsurfer staying with in my host's house who gave up his bank job in Hong Kong and
>
> has been traveling the world. He has been to twenty countries in four months and still has
>
> many more on the way (Santos, 2012q).

Sometimes a couchsurfing host will not be able to host the surfer the days that were

agreed upon. In many of those cases, there is an emergency couch request forum in each city and

the hosts in that group often offer help to those in need for at least one night. These emergency

couchsurfing requests usually require a 24 hour notice. I had to use the emergency couch request

page when traveling to Nice, France. My phone malfunctioned that week and I was unable to

send any couch requests until the morning when I was already on the train.

The following excerpt is about the hosts I found in that city:

My hosts have been fantastic and besides delicious meals, good conversations, and

laughter they helped Stephen and I to go snorkeling at the beautiful, blue water of the

French Riviera…After snorkeling our hosts showed us Monaco, France. A beautiful city

where the Formula 1 Grand Prix takes place" (Santos, 2012n).

Norway Couchsurfer and
Roman Host with researcher.
Rome, Italy
July, 8, 2012
Photography by: Anderson Santos

Couchsurfing also has events they announce for surfers visiting a town. I attended some of those events including one in Milan, Italy. It was a birthday party and there were no gifts. Several couchsurfers gathered at a restaurant and discussed their experiences. The same thing happened in Lyon where surfers gathered outside of a pub and stood for hours sharing their stories.

Supporters of online communities argue that

individuals can choose who they want to communicate with instead of being restrained by

distance, leading to a more connected world (Hopkins et al., 2004). Another way couchsurfing

imparts a sense of community is by allowing a surfer not only into their house but into their life.

The day after the midnight stroll, my host, who is Romanian, and his flat mate took me

on a hilarious tour of Madrid where we walked through museums and parks. His flat mate

is a Spanish guy who is a strange combination of an artist and a jock. Two personalities who often clash and are rarely found in a person. (Santos, 2012p).

Rosen (2011) says that Couchsurfing has various activities that promote engagement in the community, which may lead to a greater sense of belonging to the community. The couchsurfing website states that more than 300 cities host weekly events. The most popular of these events include San Francisco, USA - Thai Food Tuesdays, Paris, France - Weekly polyglot exchange party, Sydney, Australia - Shelly Beach Barbecue Sundays, Tokyo, Honk Kong - Monthly Salsa Dancing. (See Appendix B4).

> While in Torre del Greco, South of Italy, I went with my hosts to their parents house and helped them with the garden. There was a Mulberry tree loaded with fruits…I also helped them with the beans and arugula in the garden. We ate a delicious lunch prepared by my host's mother-in-law. I thought pasta was the meal but learned that it is just the 1st course. We then had homemade beef pompettes and eggplants. Next we enjoyed the fresh fruits. Next we had a wonderful coffee. I really enjoyed my time around the table with my hosts and their friends. Many times it is something surreal and the only thing I can think of to relate to are movies" (Santos, 2012m).

Rosen analyzed the aspect of belonging and trust in the couchsurfing online community using the Hersberger conceptual framework, that is very similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Hersberger defines four important attributes, " Safety (emotional and physical), sense of belonging and identification (degree of identification to the group), personal investment (level of participation), and a common symbol system. (Hersberger et al., p.138).). Kavanaugh et al. (2005), who also studied online communities and divided them between geographically close

and geographically dispersed, explained how couchsurfing is a hybrid of the two forms of online

communities as members while are geographically dispersed, are also expected to encounter

other members.

Due to my experience with couchsurfing, I have become a much more respectful and

welcoming person toward people with beliefs and values that differ from mine. I have realized

that if I want to make any impact in the life of others; I need to open the door, sometimes

literally, and allow them to feel comfortable enough to allow me into their lives where we can

dialogue at a deeper level, something that I often did during the trip.

One of the greatest things about couchsurfing is that it is not limited merely to traveling.

It is about the friendships you make.

I remembered a few things about London by talking to the couple in line for Notre Dame.

People are always in a hurry and they will run over you at the escalators. Food is cheaper

and people are always dressed professionally. There is also a French named store called

'Pret-a-manger' which doesn't exist in France and the food is much cheaper. I hope France

will be cheaper once I get away from Paris and I hope one day to come back. I am glad I

made friends with my hosts and I hope to see them again (Personal Journal entry, June

16, 2012).

Twice on this trip I had a chance to meet my host's downstairs neighbors and several

times their friends.

Usually the neighbors are older people who do not speak English but are very welcoming

and like to hear about my adventures and country. What I like is that my young single

hosts befriend their older neighbors and share a meal with them while talking and eating

on their patio. There is so much wisdom to be gained from older and experienced people

(Santos, 2012m).

The conversations and observations of the interaction of my hosts with their neighbors

also changed my people watching and meal sharing habits.

Values and Religion

As mentioned in the previous subheading, community is built when the individuals share

the same values. Although there are several values shared among couchsurfers when it relates to

traveling, generosity, and hospitality that is not to say that all couchsurfers are the same. The

beauty of this online community is that individuals of various tastes, backgrounds and lifestyles

get together and agree to learn from one another in a unique way.

Obviously there needs to be some mutual interest and affinity that attracts both surfer

and host to want to talk to each other, but there are also many other components that do not need

to be shared, only respected. Among them are values and religions, where values could be any

lifestyle, decision, or beliefs a couchsurfer may have.

During my couchsurfing experience I came across several religions as well as several

agnostics and atheists. I made a point to present them with literature and a new testament copy in

their language in each city that I went, but I often was told that they would rather not accept the

gift. I also had many conversations about the subject of values and religions and many of my

personal beliefs and values were changed and shaped because of the experiences and the

conversations. Among the changes was the growth of my acceptance for people of a different

religious background and willingness to talk and understand what they believe and where they

learned their worldview. Before the trip, I admit, I imposed my worldview and beliefs on people

but had never been given an opportunity to sit down and speak with someone that believed

different than me.

    During this couchsurfing experience I have met a surfer who is Muslim. We had dinner

together and talked about the Islamic religion and traditions. He is a very nice guy and I

am glad we are able to talk. He was explaining to me and my host how Islam views

marriage, widows, other religions. He also clarified how there are many Muslims who

fail to follow the rules they are asked to. He told me about the corrupt educational system

in his country; it doesn't matter if you study or not. At the end of the semester, the teacher

will announce to the class the price he wants, and those who pay will pass. Those who

don't will fail, and there is no dignity in working hard to learn the major you would like

to pursue as a career because there is no value placed on education in his country (Santos,

2012k).

    Respect for the individual is what grew out of the experiences and also an awareness of

the spiritual state of Europe from my limited exposure to it. During the trip I made my goal to

leave a Bible and literature with each couchsurfer I stayed with. I carried English language

Bibles for my first destination and purchased Bibles at each new country I arrived which did not

speak English.

    I went to a Christian bookstore called CLC but because it was a bank holiday due to the

jubilee the store was closed. While I was in front of the store a couple with their two

daughters approached the store, Bruce and Megan. They were also disappointed the store

was closed. I started talking to them and told them who I was and about my backpacking

trip through Europe. They decided to help me get some Bibles. They looked on their

phone and called other stores. But all the ones they tried were closed, they walked me to

a mall where there was a major bookstore, similar to the American Barnes and Noble.

They had a limited selection of bibles and their price wasn't the most affordable. I bought

one and while I was getting ready to walk out of the store Bruce approached me and said

that he and his wife wanted to bless me, he then handed me some monetary funds. You

can imagine I was shocked, amazed, happy at the same time. I thanked him very much

and exchanged contact information. I went on to London to look for an open bookstore,

while I was on the train I was thinking about Bruce and Megan and praising God. I was

puzzled by one thing: they were from London but didn't live nearby the place were we

met. I did not see him go to an ATM, yet he handed me Euros. I told him my next

destination was Europe but how did he get Euros in England so quickly will remain a

question.

I considered Bruce and Megan angels from God, it isn't the first time I have been blessed

by messengers like that. It makes me praise in awe how great God is. My next stop was at

an ironic station called 'Angel'. I called a bookstore nearby and although they were

closed they asked me to come by and they would open it for me. I was greeted by two

older men and when I explained who I was and what my mission was they also blessed

me tremendously. I was looking for the gospel of John and these men have it to me free

of charge all the copies they had. They also provided me some booklets in French and

Italian and they had new testament copies In French. I only had enough to purchase two

copies but after we prayed and before I left the store they decided they would give me

their last two copies free of charge also. What a blessing. I gave my London hosts a copy

of the gospel of John with a personal message and a copy of the new testament also.

(Santos, 2012r)

Despite my efforts not all my hosts were receptive of my attempts to share the gospel with

them. Some of my hosts declined my gift of a Bible.

" I just left Nanna's house. Lee and James were glad to see me. Nanna said the Bible was

the worst gift she had ever received. She said she had not been to church in 12 years and

the last time she went to mass it was awful. I think she will throw it away but only God

knows." (Personal Journal entry, June 5, 2012).

This was not always the reaction I received when trying to share Christian Literature.

Some of my hosts thanked me and told me they already had a Bible and encouraged me to give

the gift to someone else. Other hosts were polytheists and added Christ to the collection of other

gods and literature in their house.

Europe is a dark place spiritually. Earlier this week, the church I met with, the

International Mission Board team, has only 6 members and plans to close its doors and

sell the property. They were told it will be demolished and apartments for students will be

built in its place. I heard of another church in a similar situation. Young people see the

church as old, boring, and traditional, catholic liturgy and want nothing to do with it.

Although there are several buildings like Notre Dame, church here became history. Pray

for the struggling churches and the youth of France (Santos, 2012m).

Many of the conversations I had with my hosts and other couchsurfers about religion

revolved around the Catholic Church and how it is operated in Europe. I also learned senior

Basilica containing remains of Saint Anthony - Padova, Italy
June 30, 2012
Photography by: Anderson Santos

citizens taught religion for years to the youth, and the youth today has no interest. Protestant churches are very limited, and protestantism is a foreign concept to the people I encountered.

Another place I visited, Padova, people flock to the Church of Saint Anthony. It is a massive church with beautiful paintings. My host told me the story of Saint Anthony. We went inside the church, and we were able to see the huge casket structure. We not only saw this structure, supposedly built by Michelangelo, but also another strange room where the tongue, vocal cords, and jaw of Saint Anthony are housed. It was one of the strangest things I have seen in my life. As you can imagine, a large Catholic population inhabits Italy. Different from other places I have been in Europe, there are churches everywhere. These churches are massive, empty, Catholic temples very ornate and cold in many senses of the word." (Santos, 2012j).

One interesting thing about couchsurfing is it opens the door for topics that otherwise could be considered politically incorrect to openly discuss. The curiosity and the sense of respect and community couchsurfing brings allows people to openly talk about, defend, learn, and better understand those that hold different values or religion. In that aspect uncertainty is greatly reduced and misconceptions are allowed to surface and be resolved.
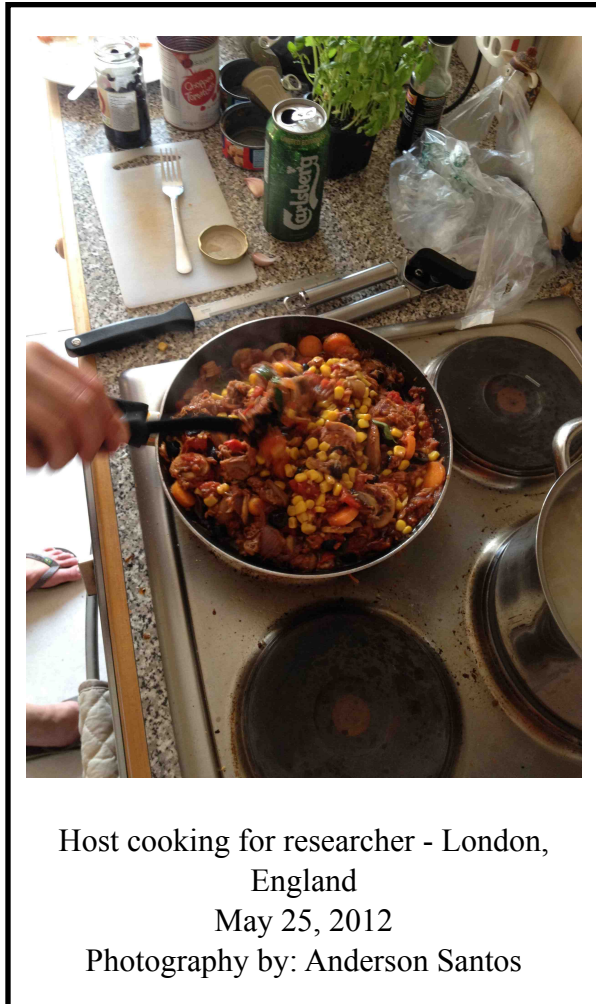
Culture

Many of the things previously discussed in this text could be placed under the umbrella of culture. The topics of language, values and even religion to some extent are all very interrelated with culture. Culture could also be labeled as the artistic expression of a group of people extending to literature, music, culinary arts, and a plethora of other areas. Although there were many of those cultural expressions and experiences during the journey across Europe, the incidents related to the couchsurfing project are the ones which interest this project.

Host cooking for researcher - London, England
May 25, 2012
Photography by: Anderson Santos

In the couchsurfing community, there are some rules and guidelines presented by the website to improve communication across cultures and the development of relationships. One of the guidelines which is often agreed upon acceptance of the couch request is how long will the guest stay. Often guests bring gifts from their country to leave with the host and it is also not uncommon to cook a meal for the host or take him or her out to dinner.

The personalization of a couch request is another guideline that couchsurfers highly value. Some individuals will include keywords in their profile and ask the surfer to include the keyword in a couch request to assure they have read through their profile and are not sending

Fresh Pasta - Padova, Italy
June 30, 2012
Photography by: Anderson
Santos

Different pies - London, England
May 28, 2012
Photography by: Anderson Santos

mass emails or spamming without intention of living up to the couchsurfing values. Couchsurfers

also dislike those who think couchsurfing is a dating website and often times those persons

couch requests are rejected or they receive a negative review and risk having their profile erased.

Couchsurfers often will tell the surfer the rules of the house as far as smoking, drinking,

hours, water conservation, and food availability. It has been my experience that hosts have

always asked and offered their personal food and time to go out and make sure I was well fed

and comfortable. One host went as far as giving me a key to his house so I could come back to it

while he was working and make myself comfortable. Hosts enjoy sharing the surfers they receive

at their house with their friends. Many times the first or second night of the stay will be a small

gathering of friends to discuss the exotic life of this foreigner staying at their friend's home.

Couchsurfing friendships develop much further than host and surfer. Several times, when my

host had more than one surfer at the time, the surfers would gather and visit the city together. The

largest group of surfers staying at the same location with me was an experience in Barcelona,

Spain where five girls were staying in an apartment where my host lived with two roommates.

Eatable Intestines - London, England
May 28, 2012
Photography by: Anderson Santos

Eatable Pigeon - London, England
May 28, 2012
Photography by: Anderson Santos

The culinary arts were very influential on my experience with couchsurfing culture. I gave myself permission to eat and drink anything that was offered to me during the trip, even if I didn't think I would enjoy it, I wanted to try it once. Through my journey I discovered the taste of horse and many other foods which I am unable to pronounce or describe what was in it, but this educated my taste buds about a whole other world of flavors and spices.

Sometimes I would encounter the culture of a place and have to ask clarifications about it from my host.

Bathrooms are also a cultural experience in Paris; they are to be loved like a distant friend, you need to spend as much time with them and love them as much as you can until you see each other again. Starting in London I saw that you have to pay for European public bathrooms. Not always, so you have to watch for those freebies. Paris

has the coolest free public bathroom I have seen so far; you push a button to open the door and when it closes you have twenty minutes of privacy. After you leave, the bathroom washes itself clean for the next person. They are usually located near the train stations but almost never near a tourist attraction. The Louvre museum charges 1.50 Euro to use the toilet before you go in. I will urinate in my pants before I flush my money down the toilet that way. Parisians, on the other hand, would not urinate their pants; they just urinate in public. I have seen and heard people pulling over in public locations and relieving themselves without the privacy of any walls. Port potties are not common and I have heard that during a public event you will see people going into the bushes to relieve themselves, not only by urinating. These are cultural intricacies that make life exciting to live in a different country (Santos, 2012c).

Other experiences involving money and poor treatment of customers was through the use of public Wi-Fi internet.

In the United States, I learned from my advertising class if you can get someone into the door of your establishment the more likely they will spend money there than if they are outside, not in Europe. Even if you are outside, you better not stand in front of the advertisement of their hamburger or the McDonald's police, yes I did say the McDonald's police, will come and ask you to leave the front of the building. I call them the police because they exist to make sure people inside the establishment are eating and only those who paid are using the restroom. The restroom in McDonald's is locked with a numerical combination that you receive once you purchased something. The police will also kick you out if you are not eating or have finished your meal and are loitering and occupying

space. I am not fond of McDonald's meals, and I almost feel as if I am doing something

illegal by hanging outside of it trying to connect to the outside world using their Wi-Fi.

(Santos, 2012o)

During the couchsurfing experience Europe, like most of the northern hemisphere, was

experiencing a hot summer.

North Brazilians and Milanese people also shy away from artificial cooling and any

breeze that could bring the blood boiling temperature to a comfortable climate that allow

you to keep your clothes on. This morning at church, I noticed this with the lady seated

next to me. When my head got cool enough that I didn't feel my blood in my brain was

evaporating, she asked for the air to be off, she was cold (Santos, 2012h).

The balance of respect and fear is at the heart of learning a different culture. Fearing the

unknown is expected but ignorance is not an excuse for prejudice. I have learned through this

experience that life may not always make sense, especially the life of others or why they do the

things they do. Yet, to maintain a relationship, both persons need to respect one another and

strive to dissipate any conflict by understanding that the expectations of someone while you are

staying at their house cannot be taken for granted and that you also have several nuances that

make your personality and culture unique enough to share and learn from and about.

Conclusion of Results

Couchsurfing is more than simply a network of people looking for connections and a

couch that a traveler can sleep on. It is an online and offline community and a reciprocal

hospitality exchange that involves language, culture, and tourism in a richer way than its

institutionalized counterpart. By nature, couchsurfers are curious and choose adventure at every

opportunity. This curiosity and sense of adventure is what motivated me to embark on a

lonesome, yet friendly voyage to understand more of himself and other couchsurfers while

reducing uncertainty and meeting needs that were physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

The uncertainty reduction strategies discussed in this chapter are not infallible. However,

they are a reminder to other couchsurfers to be thorough and open minded when selecting a host

and fellow travelers. I did not initiate all of the strategies he implemented. Some of them were

adaptations of pre-existing strategies and still others were recommendations found on the official

couchsurfing website. In the following discussion, an analysis will be made of the themes and

uncertainty reduction strategies through the lens and framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

"The most difficult task for anyone wandering through a foreign land with the hope of gaining some insight into it is the profound need to come to terms with the lives and thoughts of strangers."

-- Simon Winchester, ("Korea.", Travel.CNN.com, August 20, 2012)

As mentioned in the literature review, computer mediated communicators employ a variety of different strategies to reduce uncertainty by the use of language, pictures and timestamp of the last connection made with the person in contact. Throughout the next few paragraphs of this research, the use of uncertainty reduction strategies within the couchsurfing project will be analyzed. Strategies for reducing uncertainty are employed when surfers meet in person meanwhile other uncertainties are increased by the difference in the cultural environment.

While in the house of a Roman host, eating a meal prepared by a surfer from Uzbekistan who lived in Norway, I heard a story that closely relates to uncertainty reduction and safety concerns. The host, whom I later learned was a couchsurfing ambassador and vouched for my profile, explained about the first time he allowed someone to spend the night at his house. He had allowed the surfer to use his computer while he decided to go take a shower. While undressed and before stepping in the shower he heard a loud noise that startled him to grab a towel and run out of the bathroom, he said the first thought that ran through his head was that the surfer was getting ready to kill him and waited until he was naked so he would not run out of the house. Of course, my host was mistaken about this assumption, and he was not able to sleep all night. However, he allowed other surfers to spend the night at his place and developed some

uncertainty reduction strategies and skills which allowed him to become a couchsurfing

ambassador.

RQ1: Does Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs influence the Uncertainty Reduction Strategies of

Couchsurfers?

According to uncertainty reduction theory, people find uncertainty in interpersonal

relationships unpleasant; especially in the case of Couchsurfers, safety is one of the motivations

that encourage people to reduce such uncertainty. They know they will be entering someone's

house that could kidnap them or do them harm. Several of the axioms developed by Berger and

Calabrese were experimented and observed during the couchsurf project. Using mostly passive

strategies, like computer mediated communication, most of the investigation done by me to learn

about similar and shared networks was done through the couchsurfing website as well as

Facebook.

RQ 2: How do concerns over safety & shelter play a role in Uncertainty Reduction?

Concerning nonverbal warmth, all couchsurfers encountered were very friendly and not

only were hospitable but had non-threatening nonverbal communication except once. This

significantly reduced safety concerns because of the overall positive experience. Couchsurfers

deviate from the axioms in the aspect that axiom four states that high levels of uncertainty in a

relationship cause decreases in the intimacy level of communication content. Low levels of

uncertainty produce high levels of intimacy. Axiom five states that High levels of uncertainty

produce high rates of reciprocity. Low levels of uncertainty produce low rates of reciprocity. Self

disclosure and reciprocity among couchsurfers during this couchsurfing experience were

considerably high yet the level of uncertainty was was not as low as interpersonal relationships

developed with people which are expected to see each other again. On the other hand, one of the last things Berger and Calabrese added to uncertainty reduction theory was related to this aspect of uncertainty.

Berger made the claim of differential reduction of uncertainty explicitly in the case of anticipation of future interaction when he wrote: "When persons expect to interact with each other in the future, they will monitor their present interaction more carefully and try to reduce their uncertainties about each other more" (Berger and Bradac, 1982, p.15). This addition to the original theory attempts to explain how couchsurfers feel comfortable within the community and develop trust and friendships with strangers in such a short period of time. The reason for it can be further discussed using the similarities and liking predicted in axioms six which states that similarities between persons reduce uncertainty, while dissimilarities produce increases in uncertainty. Axiom seven which states that increases in uncertainty level produce decreases in liking; decreases in uncertainty produce increases in liking.

RQ3: How does culture influence Uncertainty Reduction?

A tremendous amount of self disclosure and meaningful conversations about life, death, marriage, sexuality, citizenship, and religion occurred during the couchsurfing experience; something axiom four states is unlikely when uncertainty level is high. While considering the couchsurfing environment and the duration of stay, more research would be required to determine the specifics of how this feature happens. When the host from Padova, Italy became an angry drunk, my stay with that host lasted less than it was intended to. That night I locked myself in the room with another couchsurfer who was experiencing couchsurfing was the first time. I tried to assure that angry hosts who break dishes were not the experience I had with

couchsurfing, and at that time I had stayed in several hosts homes. But sadly there was no more willingness to try couchsurfing for the fellow surfer staying in the same location since uncertainties for safety while couchsurfing were highly increased.

RQ3A: How do language barriers influence Uncertainty Reduction?

Communication uncertainty and apprehension because of the languages of the countries visited and the knowledge or the lack thereof was something I was aware of but which did not interfere with the research or with the couchsurfing project. While couchsurfing, there were two instances where the hosts spoke little to no English. Nonverbal communication was critical and yet uncertainties were not heightened, neither were concerns about safety because some communication was established. Yet axiom 1 of the theory clearly states that during the entry phase as the amount of verbal communication between strangers increases, the level of uncertainty for each interactant in the relationship will decrease.

As uncertainty is further reduced, the amount of verbal communication will increase. Information seeking, which is axiom 3, was the main uncertainty reduction strategy used when communicating with the non-English speaking hosts. Self-disclosure was not even possible to the intimate level because communication was limited. On the other hand, one of the experiences involving language and uncertainty also happened in Padova, Italy when my host showed me pictures of his friends said that he had pictures of his girlfriends on the shelf but none of his boyfriends. I understood the statement as an indication of self-disclosure about his sexuality. It wasn't until a day later that when the subject came up while talking about previous relationships and I asked about his homosexuality. The host had a puzzled look and wondered why I assumed he was gay. Being from Ukraine, the host structured his sentence in the same manner his native

tongue to indicate to me the gender of his friend, not his relationship with the person. During the

couchsurfing experience, I did not want language to be a barrier preventing the meeting and

study of couchsurfers, for this reason I was willing to meet couchsurfers and their friends and

work through the process of translation and observation to gain better knowledge of their culture.

RQ3B: How is community established in the midst of Uncertainty?

Uncertainty reduction around the couchsurfing community, similar to the safety theme,

makes use of axioms six and eight. Axiom eight added after the original theory was developed

and considers shared communication networks to reduce uncertainty, while lack of shared

networks increases uncertainty. Although the networks inside couchsurfing are not physical

networks of friends you have offline, there is a large virtual network where people with similar

interests can find their group and increase the probability of a couchsurfer with a similar

personality willing to host. That was my experience in Paris, France when meeting a young

filmmaker in his last year of the cinema program. Because of his affiliations in the virtual

networks of couchsurfing, I was able to see on his profile the shared networks and similarities,

> "I like my host because I knew we would be able to have conversations about similarities
>
> and things we both love, also because I was curious to learn more about the film program
>
> he was in" (personal journal, June 10, 2012).

Following a visit, both the host and the surfer are prompted to log on the couchsurfing

website to leave references for one another. For example:

> "Hi Anderson,
>
> Our records show that you accepted a friend request from Brenda Smith. If this
>
> surfer stayed with you, please let the community know about your experience!

By Writing a reference of adding your surfer as a friend, you can strengthen the

trust network that is the foundation of the couchsurfing community.

Happy Surfing.

The Couchsurfing Team"

By allowing people who would otherwise never meet or speak to do so is just one more

way couchsurfing can create community amidst uncertainties. While couchsurfing, some hosts

received more than one surfer in their place. In several of these instances, the other surfers asked

to join in the exploration of the city together and through that I was able to converse with them,

get to know them better, and reduce uncertainty through interpersonal communicate n while

visiting a tourist attraction or waiting for the train. Because I was not able to look at the online

profile of that surfer prior to meeting in person and discover the similarities and reduce

uncertainty, performing passive strategies of uncertainty reduction was the only strategy used.

Most dialogue revolved around active and interactive ways of reducing uncertainty. Lastly,

couchsurfing gatherings and events allows surfers to reduce uncertainty without concerns of

hosting or surfing with a couchsurfer they may never see again. This also led to deep and

meaningful conversations during the couchsurfing experience.

RQ3C: How do values & religion influence Uncertainty Reduction?

Before the couchsurfing trip, my interactions with people of a different religion had been

very limited and the levels of uncertainty about communicating with them were very high.

Expectations and assumptions about their faith were solely based out of conversations and the

interactions of others. For the purpose of this trip and gaining deeper knowledge, I attempted to

suspend any prejudice and interact with the different people for the purpose of learning more.

What I learned through conversations and personal reflections changed his outlook on religion. I observed that behind the ignorance about the rituals of a religion was a person with a background and experiences similar to his, curiosities about the beliefs and what was taught about religion by elders without questioning surfaced. I learned that he had been trained to dislike anyone who did not share the same belief as his and to condemn him or her to hell for his or her way of life or lack of understanding about what was considered spiritually valuable.

My experience and personal reflection taught me high levels of uncertainty call for more information seeking, reciprocity, and self-disclosure in order to reduce said uncertainty. When Muslim surfers learned that my personal beliefs were the embodiment of someone of a different religion whom they were taught to dislike, they became more willing to listen when realizing I was communicating in a non-threatening way and willing to tell them what he believed without converting, condemning or criticizing them.

Many things that could classify within the intricate theme of culture have been subdivided into other themes for the purpose of this thesis. One of the reasons for the intricacy of the theme is that one can offend a host or surfer depending on the understanding and use of culture. Maslow's hierarchy of needs classifies physiological needs with the most importance, which cleanliness and sanitation would fall under. One of the hosts in France did not shower often, a cultural stereotype often associated with the French, which the couchsurfer was able to determine through your sense of smell. Adhering to a similar stereotype, I found that the host's girlfriend was not fond of the razor and had legs as hairy as a male. Such cultural exposure and differences interfere with reduction of interpersonal uncertainty when communicating. It also

interferes with the couchsurfing aspect because it would be rude of me as a surfer to comment or make the host feel uncomfortable of this cultural behavior within his own house.

The cultural dining experience also changed my perspective on eating and drinking. In Italy, wine is drank as juice from a large container, bought as cheaply as Three Euro per jug. The interesting thing about such wine is the bottling process. Since it is quickly consumed, the wine is not preserved like more expensive bottles, and it turns into vinegar within days. At first, such habitual consumption shocked me. While visiting a university's cafeteria in Italy with one of the hosts I also learned that next to the fruit juices and sodas students have access to wine in the cafeteria beverage machines.

Since the alcohol paradigm from the cultures where I had previously experienced was culturally different. The same is true for tea drinking in the United Kingdom; it is a tradition of uncertainty reduction of the country that a surfer who is not fond of tea would be considered rude not to partake. The cultural experience has led me to let go of pre-existing biases and embrace different cultures. The fact that in French culture it is perfectly acceptable to relieve yourself in public by urinating or defecating may generate some uncertainty to some Couchsurfers. Such uncertainty when minimized, as predicted by Berger and Calabrese, will increase interpersonal communication and connection. While walking through dangerous and highly populated areas filled with 'pickpocketers' and beggars, hosts have warned and taught me how not to attract attention to himself, decreasing uncertainty and increasing my security, something a tourist who is not a couchsurfer is not able to take advantage of.

Conclusion about the themes:

Although understandable that couchsurfing is not an experience all travelers can enjoy, there are several positives as well as negative aspects of it. While the reduction of uncertainty may be a hard task for some people interacting with strangers, those who are able to overcome their reservations about entering the house and culture of someone with whom they had no previous in person interaction still employ several uncertainty reduction strategies.

The axioms discussed by Berger and Calabrese proved to be accurate in their prediction of behavior and interpersonal communication between couchsurfers. Maslow's hierarchy of needs influences couchsurfers decisions on a place to stay and their uncertainty reduction strategies. Couchsurfers follow the hierarchy and employ it while traveling caring first for their physiological needs and lastly for their self-esteem needs. It has been my experience as a couchsurfer that uncertainty continues to exist during the trip and after having met and established safety with the host(s); however, it is significantly reduced to a tolerable level that allows interpersonal communication to occur and satisfactory communication to be established.

Limitations of the research

One of the strengths of this research is the amount of hosts involved. Apart from two experiences, couchsurfers hosted me in all of the 22 cities visited during the couchsurfing trip. There were also other couchsurfers who were met through events or through a host. Two data sources were used for this research: a public online blog and a personal journal. While the personal journal provides information for the autoethnography, the blog provides detailed and topic related data available to anyone interested. Although language was not a barrier for me, it could have been had this research been expanded to more than the 5 countries visited.

Conversely, expanding the research to more countries would require more money and time; therefore, these are some of the limitations of the research.

Couchsurfing.org is a website that does not have a physical representation of a store; therefore, access to the Internet is required. This could be a limitation to some people even though the number of Internet accessible devices and locations in the world is quickly increasing. Previous research about couchsurfing has focused on the communication systems and reference systems developed by the website as well as the rating system and its relation to e-commerce and dating websites. Little research involving couchsurfing has been conducted through a post positive research method or an autoethnography study. This provides the most data about the couchsurfing experience; however, the data varies from surfer to surfer and cannot be replicated or provide the same results.

Future research

The couchsurfing project presents so many research topics for interpersonal communication researchers and other disciplines. The research presented in this thesis could provide different results if experimented with couchsurfers where the variables of language, culture, safety, and religion of both the researcher and surfers are different. In the same manner, backpacking is a lifestyle common throughout Europe and widely accepted. Although there are many couchsurfers in America, public knowledge about couchsurfing is limited and no study was found to discuss couchsurfers within their own country. The impact of couchsurfing on the local economy, tourism, and lodging has not been measured in current research available.

Future research on backpacker tourism could investigate the depth and breath of relationships formed through couchsurfing as well as how users maintain those relationships.

Future research could also investigate the existence of couchsurfers in third world countries as well as the impact the couchsurfing values of leaving the place better than it was found. Cohen discussed in his research the concept of center and how travelers associate with their culture pro or con while experiencing a foreign territory. Research about how that concept of center works within the couchsurfing community or if it changes through the couchsurfing experience, has not been found. On the other hand research has been made about perceived risk and trust among couchsurfers, from an outsider perspective based on quantitative data. It would be interesting to find out if members actually perceive the relationship of risk and trust in the same way as suggested by the study.

Conclusion

The personal reflections and experiences generated through the couchsurfing experience if the 2012 summer have changed the way I looks at the world and relationships. Because of this experience, I have learned to be more respectful and accepting of people who hold a different viewpoint or lifestyle. That is not to say they are necessarily friends, although some certainly are. It is possible to reduce uncertainty about safety long enough to listen to their viewpoint and seek to understand their religion, values, and culture.

Through the experience I have learned that my way is not the highway, instead that the road is eternal and each person is traveling on their own road which dead ends, merges, and sometimes crosses the road I am traveling on. The way to achieve such understanding is not only through dialogue but by becoming comfortable with uncertainty while employing mechanisms which allow others to enter my life and challenge the beliefs previously held.

I adapted to a different way of thinking that in no way compromised personal beliefs and is a positive, balanced outcome of dialogue and understanding of a different culture. "During my personal reflection time, I have been writing about the goals I want to see accomplished in my life for the next five years. Right now they seem hard, distant, difficult, and impossible. But nothing is impossible for God when I trust him with faith. I encourage you to cast your vision also, pray about it, and give it to God" (Santos, 2012e). Days after writing that blog post I wrote in my personal journal, "I wonder if I will be able to write about these adventures in a book someday" (Personal Journal, June 25, 2012)

Because of the inside perspective autoethnography provides, it is the best way to study such an amorphous community as couchsurfing and its culture. Moving through a location and witnessing various inhabitants' daily struggles first hand, gives couchsurfers the ethnographical experience of being immersed in a culture apart from their own. Those who choose to share their life, create connections, offer kindness, stay curious about ways to help the community, and by leaving it better than it was found truly embody the core values of couchsurfing. While couchsurfing, those who reduce uncertainty, meet the needs of others, and have their needs met indeed become world citizens through adapting and transforming themselves and their environment positively.

Finally, couchsurfers do not select their hosts and surfers independent of cognitive and psychological aspects, but they should not be conceived as being determined solely by them. In the same manner, tourists who engage in institutionalized tourism are also able to interact with the culture and employ uncertainty reduction strategies.

Appendiix A

Liberty University

Department of Digital Media and Communication Arts

Research Study Privacy Documentation

Study Title: Couchsurfing

Researcher: Anderson da Silva Santos

Photographs, Transcripts, audio visual aid, messages and written interpretation of conversations collected between May 2012 until August 2012 during a couchsurfing trip which the researcher came in contact with other couchsurfers will to be used in a research study carried out by Anderson da Silva Santos. This form explains the research study and describes in summary form the study to be published as well as the ways which privacy will be preserved in this study. The identity of all persons in contact during the trip will be concealed to avoid them being identified or located by readers of this study.

What is this Study About?

The purpose of the study is to understand how concerns over safety and shelter play a role in uncertainty reduction? How do language barriers influence uncertainty reduction?How is a community established in the midst of uncertainty? How do values and religion influence Uncertainty? What influence does culture have over uncertainty?

Risks of the study:

The information on this study could affect couchsurfers in areas such as psychological, economic, social, employment, reputation, or loss of confidentiality or sensitive information.
Precautions are being taken to minimize risks by keeping confidentiality and if risks occur the data used in this study will be removed from the final publication.

Data Privacy:

The data for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by federal and state law. No published results will identify the couchsurfers involved, their name or address will not be revealed and any picture with them will not have names revealed and will not be associated with the findings.

The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.

Any questions about this study or the information in this form should be address to Anderson Santos, 2andersonroad@gmail.com, (+1) 904 728 2288. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or would like to report a concern or complaint about this study, please contact the Liberty University Institutional Review Board at (434) 582 2000, or e-mail irb@liberty.edu, or regular mail at: 1971 University Boulevard · Lynchburg, VA - USA 24515. Participation in this research study was completely voluntary.

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