CouchSurfing:

Experiences, Reputation, References and Decision-making in an Online Hospitality Network

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis was to analyse behavioural patterns that occur after a negative experience during a hospitality exchange. The focus of this study is the largest online hospitality network to date, the CouchSurfing Project. CouchSurfing enables travellers to connect and to offer each other help in form of a free hospitality exchange. Furthermore, CouchSurfing presents a platform for cultural exchange and the possibility for members to connect in this online-offline community.

As part of a qualitative study, a voluntary online questionnaire has been distributed and answered by 35 CouchSurfing members. The results give insight of how they deal with a negative experience after offline interaction in terms of reference giving and what they do when encountering a negative reference. While the hospitality exchange is build on trust that has been created through various features of the hospitality network, this thesis investigated what happens if trust is violated and how this influences the further actions of its members. As a result, multiple intentions of reference giving or non- reference giving have been identified. These reasons range from reference as reward or punishment, to educational reasons. The underlying thread to decision-making are concerns regarding status and reputation, being it one's own or those of other members. Furthermore, members' actions create an apparent paradox. They criticize the flaws of the reputational system as safety generating function, while simultaneously their actual actions and decisions in leaving references neglect to contribute to former.

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Tiivistelmä

Opinnäytetyöni tarkoituksena on analysoida käyttäytymistapoja, joita esiintyy kielteisten, vieraanvaraisuuteen perustuvien kokemuksien jälkeen. Tutkimus keskittyy laajimpaan tällä hetkellä Internetissä toimivaan yhteisöön: CouchSurfing-järjestöön. CouchSurfingin avulla matkailijat voivat pitää yhteyttä toisiinsa ja tarjota apua ilmaisen majoituksen muodossa. Lisäksi CouchSurfing tarjoaa kulttuurivaihtoa ja mahdollisuuden tutustua Internetissä olevaan yhteisöön.

Tutkimukseni on luonteeltaan laadullinen. 35 CouchSurfing-järjestön jäsentä vastasivat Internetissä olleeseen kyselyyn. Tulokset paljastavat, kuinka vastaajat käsittelevät kielteisiä kokemuksia kohtaamisten jälkeen, ja kuinka ne vaikuttavat heidän antamiin suosituksiin ja miten he itse kokevat kielteiset suositukset. CouchSurfing-järjestö perustuu vieraanvaraisuuteen ja käyttäjien väliseen luottamukseen. Opinnäytetyöni tutkii, mitä tapahtuu, kun luottamusta käytetään väärin, ja kuinka se vaikuttaa järjestön jäsenten käyttäytymiseen. Käyttäjillä on aikomuksia antaa tai jättää antamatta suosituksia. Suositukset vaihtelevat palkitsemisesta rangaistukseen, tausta-vaikuttajina ovat yhteisön hierarkkisuus ja epävarmuus. Päätöksen tekemisen taustalla on huoli omasta ja toisten käyttäjien statuksesta ja maineesta. Yhteisön jäsenien käytös luo ilmeisen paradoksin. He kritisoivat, että suosituksiin ja maineeseen perustuva järjestelmä ei takaa turvallisuutta. Samalla heidän käytöksensä ja päätöksensä jättää suosituksia antamatta ylläpitää nykyistä järjestelmää.

Asiasanat CouchSurfing, Internet, kielteinen kokemus, maine, suositukset, vaihtokauppa, vieraanvaraisuus	
Säilytyspaikka Jyväskylän Yliopisto	
Muita tietoja	

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Motivation

I have been a CouchSurfing (CS) member since 2007 and have been active as surfer and host on a regular basis. I preferably attend CouchSurfing meetings wherever I go, as it is the easiest way to get to know and to connect with people in a new place and country. Although I had various, mostly very positive, CouchSurfing experiences as host and guest, it still happened that after a face-to-face encounter I was struggling to find the right words when I wanted or had to leave a reference on the CS profile for the other member. Leaving a reference is not mandatory but in some way implied by the CouchSurfing network as it is part of a reciprocal exchange. In hindsight however, I realized that cases had occurred where I had not left a reference at all. A few times it was simply because I neglected it and another time I did not know how to comment, therefore left it altogether. Also with every reference you leave, there are concerns whether the other party has had the same experience and would leave a similar reference.

The case of rating others in an online hospitality network seems even more difficult if a negative experience took place. A friend, who hosts people regularly, was struggling of whether to leave a negative reference for a person that had stayed at his place. He discussed the issue at length with other CouchSurfing members and even with the person that had "surfed" his couch. While the case seemed clear to the other CS members he shared his experience with — it was not only a violation of trust according to CS standards but any kind of standards (his car was taken without his permission and only returned hours later with an empty tank and the person in question denied that he had taken it although there was no doubt)—the friend was still pondering whether to leave a negative reference as he was afraid about receiving a retaliatory negative reference in return. Although with more than 100+ positive references on his profile, he was concerned that a negative one might damage his reputation in the CS community. Eventually he left a negative reference, after discussing the

issue via private CS message with the so-called surfer. As all CS messages are recorded he wanted to make sure that in case of a retaliatory negative reference he could prove that he would be in the right and the negative reference could be deleted from his profile.

To build up a CouchSurfing profile takes time. Of course, the basic information like personal description and photos can be added without much effort, but the more friend-connections, successful CS experiences and positive references one has gathered the better one ranks in the CS community and is deemed an "experienced surfer". And this is a process that takes time and demands face-to-face encounters. The CS reference system is one of the main functions of the network to generate safety and trust. As above example shows, while leaving a positive reference may be hard enough, leaving a negative reference is connected with difficulties, and doubts. As Adamic et al. (2011) showed in a recent survey, members are more likely not to leave a reference at all if the CS experience, either as host or guest, was perceived as neutral or negative (Adamic, et al. 2011). Hospitality exchange is build on reciprocity and trust (Molz 2007), but if negative experiences stay unmentioned it seems to neither fulfil a reciprocal exchange nor add to the safety of the system.

This leads to the questions of what are the reasons of members for not leaving a reference and the expectations for reciprocity among members and whether they concern hospitality or information exchange? What are the concerns and problems if a negative experience has occurred, how are they dealt with among members, and how important is one's reputation and those of others when dealing with references?

In this introductory chapter I provide an overview of the motivation for the study and introduction to the subject of study: The CouchSurfing Project. I will give an overview of the CouchSurfing network, its functions, and safety measures. Afterward, the research questions and a brief overview of the methodology will follow.

Chapter 2 will give a literature review of comparative studies of the CouchSurfing community and articles concerning members' participation and motivation in both, online communities and reference/reputation systems. The chapter looks at how trust and safety are generated in an online environment and at literature related to online participation in social networks, the means of reciprocity that are needed to keep online communities working, and the implications of biased references in relation to means of reciprocity and reputation.

After formulating the research problem and giving a literature overview, Chapter 3 discusses the research design and includes an overview of the development of research methodology and data collection techniques.

Chapter 4 focused on the data analysis of the questionnaire. Key themes regarding the research topic are analysed and supported by observational findings from CouchSurfing discussion group forums. The later part of the chapter then focuses on discussing the findings in terms related to answering the research question.

Chapter 5: Conclusion presents a brief summary of the previous chapters. The research questions of Chapter 1 are answered, followed by reflections and implication of the study, and further suggestions for research.

1.2 The CouchSurfing Project

The focus of the research is CouchSurfing.org (CS), an ever growing virtual hospitality network community based on physical and digital space. While the number of hospitality networks, such as hospitalityclub.org, bewelcome.org, gobalfreeloaders.com, and tripping.org is growing, CouchSurfing represents the largest hospitality community so far with, according to latest statistics, more than 5.5 million members (The CouchSurfing Project 2013).

On CouchSurfing members create a profile and participate in the network by offering their couch to guests – so-called surfers, look for couches as guests, offer advice, organize meetings, look for travel companions, discuss issues about the community in group posts, and exchange stories, information and culture. In this sense, hospitality networks also hold their own network culture, consisting of symbolic structures of certain interpersonal expectations (Molz 2007). The idea of staying at a strangers place or letting a stranger stay at one's own place demands a high degree of trust which is apparently given and created by the CouchSurfing network. In order to find potential hosts, surfers look through a database of profiles of CouchSurfing members, living in destinations that they will be visiting and make requests for accommodations primarily based on the information provided in the profiles.

Figure 1: Screenshot of CS Co-founder Casey Fenton's profile

Figure 2: Screenshot of Casey Fenton's friend connections and personal description

In order to build up trust, various functions are available to create what Tran (2009) has referred to as so-called *initial trust*. This trust in general is necessary if the interaction takes place among parties who do not know each other. Furthermore, inherent to trust are expectations of predictability and dependability (Adamic, et al. 2011). For this purpose, CouchSurfing offers a multi-faceted reputation system that includes three components that generate trust, as various studies have shown (see Bialski & Batorski 2010; Lauterbach et al. 2009; Molz 2007; Tan 2010; Tran 2009): physical verification, vouching, and personal references. In addition, a friendship feature enables members to link their profiles to others by indicating their degree of friendship.

The first step for new members when signing up is an optional verification of their home address in exchange for a small donation, whereas the verification takes place through the member's credit card details. After paying the money, a postcard with a verification code will be send to the given address and after typing in the code given on the card, the location and person are verified.

A further function to generate trust is the vouching system. A core group of presumably "trustworthy" people vouches for others that they believe are trustworthy. Users have to have at least three vouches, only then can they vouch for others and the trust network

is expanded. Lauterbach et al. (2009) analyze the vouching system in comparison to the degree and amount of friendship ties that can be found on members' profiles (Lauterbach, et al. 2009).

The last, and most common feature which can be found on sites such as eBay, Amazon, or other networks where members exchange services or goods, is the personal reference system. Tran (2009) suggests that although free accommodation amongst members can be seen as a product of the CS network and therefore is a service, that with its mission statement and CouchSurfing philosophy—to spread tolerance and create cultural exchange— the CS network also creates a sense of belonging as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Figure 3: Reference list of Casey Fenton

The reference system of CouchSurfing will be the main focus of this study in relation to reciprocity, reputation, and community discussions, as it is not only used to create trust but also safety. References are a valuable function to keep a record of a member's previous

encounters with other members. Therefore CouchSurfing describes references as being one of its key safety features (The CouchSurfing Project 2013b). Every profile contains a reference section in the right hand bottom corner, where members are supposed to leave a personal reference and grade the overall experience with positive, neutral, or negative. On top of the list, a profile informer is incorporated, which displays the total number of references. Shown in those individual reference statistics are listed the amount of positive, negative, and neutral references the owner of the profile received and whether those references were received by hosts, surfers, or travel companions. Clicking on a particular section of references, the references can be displayed accordingly. Hence this seems to provide a good first overview of a member's activity and reciprocity within the community and it is valuable for third parties. If a reference has been reciprocated and how is immediately visible as they are displayed accordingly (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Reciprocated reference on CS profile

The importance of references within the CS network in order to generate trust has been shown by Adamic et al. (2011) and by Tran (2009), who found out in qualitative interviews with CS and non-CS members that "[a]mongst the CouchSurfers interviewed, there seemed to be a great reliance upon references to help their decision-making process" (Tran 2009, 64).

CouchSurfing gives guidelines about references (The CouchSurfing Project 2013b), how to write one and what to do in case someone considers leaving negative feedback for another member. CS defined references as

> feedback you write that appears on other people's profile that describes the interaction you have had with them. References are for the benefi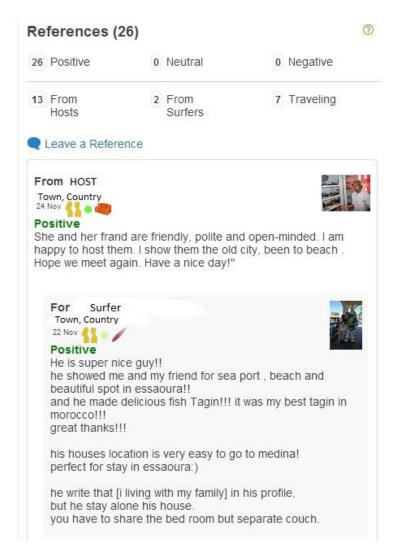t of other members: in a reference, you communicate information about a member to rest of the CouchSurfing community. Other people can read this information and make an informed decision about who they wish to host, surf with, or meet (The CouchSurfing Project 2013b).

In the ideal case, the feedback is positive and a reference is reciprocated. Consequently, the outcome of one's feedback is decisive for one's reputation. "The presence of positive references on a profile would likely "reward" the individual with having requests more easily accepted in the future as well as building a good reputation amongst the community, while the opposite would likely be true should a member have negative references on their profile" (Tran 2009, 84). Therefore, from the positive references of other members, the user can draw conclusions of whether a person seems to be easy to interact with, while negative reference warn others, in which case they would fulfil their function as safety feature. Tran (2009) agrees by mentioning that in the context of CouchSurfing, positive, neutral, or negative references state whether or not a betrayal of trust took place (Tran 2009).

1.2.1. Reputation, reciprocity, and references in the CS network

CouchSurfing is doing its best to build up trust by trying to eliminate risks of the unknown, which non-CS members may think of first when one is concerned about the idea of letting strangers sleep on one's couch. Above introduced three safety features - vouching, references, and verification - implement a certain degree of initial trust in the CS online network community. While the tools to create trust and a degree of safety are given, they also rely heavily on the participation and reciprocity of its members. A risk/violation in building

up trust may be given when members do not participate and use the given functions to create safety. Chapter 2 will discuss in more detail the notions of reciprocity within hospitality networks and the idea and motivation for members' participation. Through the interaction with others and by creating a reciprocal exchange, not only trust and safety within the community are increased but a sense of belonging can be evoked and an increase in social capital can be witnessed (Strommer 2010). This can best be seen in terms of more elaborate personal descriptions, photos, friendship ties (the link connection to other profiles), and the number of references which in return increase or decrease a member's reputation and trustworthiness, and therefore one's chances to connect easier with other CouchSurfers (Strommer 2010).

An important factor for this to mention is the time it takes to establish one's own trust level. To create a profile is apparently the easiest step, but to establish friendship-links, and to receive vouches and references, is a process which takes time. Therefore, the more accumulated a profile is with those connections the better the person may be viewed.

Another problem often mentioned in connection with online social networks is the problem of identity. Or as the quote goes, "On the internet no one knows that you are a dog". As pointed out, CS is doing its best to implement functions to verify a person's identity. Also an anonymous online identity within the CS network would make less sense, as the face-to-face encounter with another member should be one of the main reasons when joining the network. If one is interested in being an active member within the community or using its service, their online profile should somewhat match their offline identity. This shows the importance of the reference system where an opinion of a third party can be taken into consideration. Because "in a community such as CouchSurfing, the trust relationship that is initially formed online is then transformed into the offline environment" (Tran 2009, 10) and if this trust would be broken the reference function is supposed to warn others. But, if this function is not used the creation of safety and trust is broken as well.

1.3 Problem Statement

CouchSurfing is an interesting research subjects as it presents a hybrid of online-offline environment. The main body of previous research in regard to hospitality online networks has been mainly focused on trust and how trust is build online and offline. Several quantitative studies have been conducted in regards of reciprocity, vouching, reference system and friend tie correlation in regard to trust. There has been no or little research about breaches of trust and how they are dealt with by users and within the community and how negative experiences influence decision making.

Adamic et al. (2011) carried out a study to give complementary insight into CouchSurfing and how users give ratings. They take their results from a large-scale of quantitative data resulting from a survey conducted with 527 members in collaboration with The CouchSurfing Project (Adamic, et al. 2011). As already pointed out in various studies (see Adamic et al. 2011; Tran 2009; Teng et al. 2010; Tan 2010) CouchSurfing.org shows a near absence of negative feedback. This is less due to the overwhelming amount of positive experiences than, as Adamic et al. (2011) point out, to the challenges members are confronted with when they are supposed to rate other users. They point out that the reference system seems to work well, however they found key issues, which affect the accuracy of ratings and their perceived utility. One of the main points brought up by Adamic et al. (2011) are their findings that show that public ratings are more reciprocal and positive than private ones[1] which leads to the assumption that members fear reciprocal action even though reciprocal exchange is the key factor in hospitality exchange networks.

Drawing from these quantitative findings, this study attempts a qualitative approach, focusing on negative experiences and how they are handled by CouchSurfing members individually and within the community. Further concerns are the importance of reputation and status and how they affect decision-making and participation of the participants, and their understanding and definition of reciprocal exchange.

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[1] As of 2013, private anonymous trust ratings that were required when leaving a reference for another member and stated the degree of trust for that person have been removed.

1.4 Research Questions

The topics of feedback giving, reputation, and reciprocity are closely intertwined within the CouchSurfing network, therefore the research question evolve around all three concepts. Beside the question of what constitutes reputation and status and how it influences participation and feedback giving, the following research questions provide the focus and direction of the research:

1. How do negative experiences influence decision-making in an online hospitality network?

2. Information sharing: How are negative experiences and references dealt with and discussed by members and the community?

1.5 Methodology

This qualitative study will be based on an interpretive approach, combining observational findings of group forums and qualitative data gathered from an anonymous online questionnaire distributed among CS members. The aim of a qualitative questionnaire is to get a better in depth understanding of members' opinion about reputation and status within the hospitality network, their concerns about negative experiences and the considerations for leaving/not leaving a reference. The data will be supported by observational findings and compared to the theoretical framework given in Chapter 2: Literature Review. A more detailed discussion of the methodology can be found in Chapter 3: Research Design.

There are a few limitations that may influence this study and which may be important to mention in order to get a better idea of the scope of this research.

As this is a case study of CouchSurfing, the findings are limited to this online hospitality social network. Furthermore, as this is a qualitative study, the number of questionnaires obtained is a limited sample and the findings cannot be seen as representative for the entire network. However, in combination with group discussion observation, a more coherent picture of the community and its interaction has been tried to achieve.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Hospitality is always a risky affair, fraught with the anxiety that the guest may become a parasite, or worse, the enemy.
(Molz 2007, 70)

In the following chapter an overview of concepts and studies that have been done related to CouchSurfing as online hospitality network community, and studies that can be applied and compared to the context of a hospitality online networks are presented. This will give the necessary background for answering the research questions of this study, helping to support, compare, and analyze the findings of Chapter 4.

The literature review is not an exhaustive account due to the limitations of this study. As literature source served mainly online journals and electronic data bases. In addition, a list of published studies[2] related to the CouchSurfing network has been put together and made available online by the CouchSurfing group for Researchers and "Thesis Writers", as well as the group "Help with research papers". In all groups, researchers discuss current research issues related to the CouchSurfing network and share already published studies. In collaboration with CS members, Edward Pultar put together a CS library, listing already published studies related to the CS hospitality network.

2.1 Trust and Safety in Online communities

For a virtual hospitality community network which has the purpose to connect strangers online and offline with each other, the notions of trust and safety are pivotal. One may assume that establishing trust in online community networks may be difficulty and the more in virtual hospitality community networks; hence systems of safety are incorporated to eliminate risks.

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[2] https://sites.google.com/site/edwardpultar2/links

Tan (2010) refers to two kinds of online trust, firstly Individual-to-individual trust mediated by technology, and secondly, technology as the object of trust. As trust is essential to virtual hospitality networks it also increases cooperation (Tan 2010, 367). Hence, particularly people who join a hospitality online network expect a certain degree of trust as affirmed by Tran (2009) who shows that initial trust is part of the CouchSurfing network. This initial trust is generated through information sharing and repeated interactions overtime (Ba 2001). Rosen et al. (2011) support this argument, stating that the sharing of information creates ties which in return generate trust:

> The quality and quantity of ties an individual has represents how connected one is, and highly connected individuals typically have access to more resources and thus an increased amount of social capital. Active CouchSurfers accumulate friends and references that represent trusting relationships embedded in their social networks (Rosen, Lafontaine and Hendrickson 2011, 3).

Tran (2009) refers to Nissenbaum (2001) who identifies history and reputation as one of the main characteristics of whether or not trust will be created. Both, history and reputation, are present in form of references on members profiles within the CouchSurfing network, giving an idea about the members past activities within the community. As various studies have shown (see Resnick et al. 2000; Tran 2009; Bialski 2010; Adamic et al. 2011), references guide trust decisions. But besides creating trust, the creation of safety is equally important. While trust is intrinsic to the CS network, safety has to be created. Ba (2001) points out that "the existing mechanisms available to promote trust and ensure secure transactions mostly centre around one's reputation, which is identity based" (Ba 2001, 329).

In mere virtual environments such as online trading networks, where online identity is easy to establish and the real identity is unknown, online transactions turn into impersonal exchanges. This anonymity enables possibilities to misbehave and to violate trust without paying reputational consequences because a new online identity can be easily created (Ba 2001). But, in a hospitality online network which is based on virtual and physical space, identity building is more elaborate and those risks are eliminated to some degree. A third party should ensure the member's identity and trustworthiness by referring to previous offline interaction from which another party can make assumptions of whether or not the person on the profile is trustworthy. This trust, although between persons who do not know each other, is increased or decreased if a person knows a third party which has had a previous experience

with that member (Ba 2001). This exemplifies the function of ties as mentioned by Rosen et al. (2011). Nonetheless, as Molz (2007) points out, "one of the key conditions of membership in these communities [hospitality networks] is the reciprocal exchange of trust" (Molz 2007, 70). That way, members' themselves create a safe community and simultaneously a sense of belonging is produced (Molz 2007). The importance of a sense of belonging and reciprocity for hospitality online network communities will be discussed in the following chapter.

But to take up the issue of identity once more, in addition to the reference system, the CouchSurfing network has a network of interrelated forms of identity verification which have been central to a number of studies in terms of generating trust among members (Lauterbach et al. 2009; Bialski 2010; Pultar 2007; Rosen et al. 2011; Adamic et al. 2011; etc.). The functions incorporated in the CS network, vouching, friend-links, and verification, already have been introduced in Chapter 1.2. In addition to above mentioned safety features, an anonymous trust rating system can be found when one connects one's profile to another member or leaves a reference. This data is mainly collected for The CouchSurfing Project itself but also has been used in studies such as Teng et al. (2010) which showed that anonymous trust ratings show a larger variety of ratings, from distrust to high trust, while they also compared it to the friendship level between people who give trust ratings. According to their findings, those anonymous trust ratings seem to display a more accurate picture, as compared to the large number of positive feedback found in public ratings displayed by the CS statistics (Teng et al. (2010); Adamic et al. (2011)). Respectively, Teng et al. (2010) conclude that their findings indicate that public references "should not be taken at face value, but rather that one should examine the context in which they were given. Public, identified ratings tend to be disproportionately positive, but only when the ratee is another user who can reciprocate" (Teng, Lauterbach and Adamic 2010).

2.2 Participation in online communities

"A community is defined as a group of individuals who want to interact to develop knowledge, share experience and build up their own identity".[3] Developing a common knowledge base is a driving force of a community. Also, in order to belong to the community, membership is the first step and membership then also signifies a "right" of belonging (Hersberger, Rioux and Cruitt 2005). Rosen et al. (2011) refer to Hersberger's *conceptual framework* from 2007 were she defines two kinds of community, a traditional one which is based on geographical locations and a second one, a relational community where individuals have shared values, goals and interests (Rosen, Lafontaine and Hendrickson 2011, 5). Respectively online communities that are formed to build up human relationships are usually centred on a common purpose or some cohesive bonding effort, and have in common that they are built on information sharing and communication, both formal and informal (Hersberger, Rioux and Cruitt 2005). Therefore the CouchSurfing community falls into the second category. As Hersberger et al. (2005) elaborate further, those "common interests lead to relationship building in both face-to-face and virtual communities. As in territorial communities, these relationships are dynamic and ever changing. Certain community members will develop stronger ties to certain members than others" (Hersberger, Rioux and Cruitt 2005).

The formation of ties is essential for an online social network community. According to Tan (2010), in order to build up trust among users of a social network, certain information is necessary within the system. Listed as vital information are references and a track of past behaviour and actions of the members, a clear privacy and security policy, and third party certifications (Tan 2010). To establish this trust and to create ties, as stated above, information exchange has to take place (also see Rosen et al. 2011; Hersberger et al. 2005). Within the CS network this information exchange is granted through the friendship connections on users' profiles, vouching, verification, and the reference system, and in addition, the organization of groups and discussion forums. For example as indicated by Boyd and Ellison (2008) the public display of connections is fundamental for social online networks. While trust is developed through information exchange it also supports the coherence of the community.

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[3] http://www.ec.tuwien.ac.at/~christoph/files/ITT_Online_Communities.pdf

Rosen et al. refer to Gilchrist (2004), and Sohn and Leckenby (2007), to support the argument that "[c]ommunication 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" (Rosen, Lafontaine and Hendrickson 2011, 5). A virtual community which is defined by a common mission (e.g cultural exchange and hospitality) and which is "established based on a perceived strong common purpose will [be] likely [to] exhibit a stronger identification with shared values" (Hersberger, Rioux and Cruitt 2005).

As additional community building factor is that participation in online communities depends on the time a user has been a member of that community and the amount of time he spends on participation and interaction with other community members (Wang and Fesenmaier 2004). Only with a certain amount of time invested, the user establishes himself in the community and accumulates to the rules before he becomes an active participant. Moreover, Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) refer in their argumentation to Kozinets (1999), stating that "an Internet user will at first merely ''browse'' information sources, ''lurking'' to learn about a consumption interest. However, as the online consumer becomes more sophisticated in Internet use, he/she will begin to visit sites that have ''third party'' information, and eventually may make contact with other consumers online, and consequently become a frequent participant in group discussions" (Wang and Fesenmaier 2004, 719). In the same sense Lampel and Bhalla (2007) allude to the factors of affiliation or a feeling of belonging, which has to be generated by the community, and is essential in order to create an online identity. As part of this online identity is necessary to show active participation, "and a sense of status when demonstrating competence by helping others" (Lampel and Bhalla 2007, 442).

2.3 Reciprocity in online communities

Information exchange, the creation of ties and the foundation of CouchSurfing are based on the principle of reciprocity which has been examined by Molz (2007). Lauterbach et al. (2009) also refer to Molz's study of reciprocity and its meaning within the context of hospitality exchanges. They state that although "reciprocity is not strictly enforced on hospitality services, it is certainly encouraged as a community norm through statements on the

sites as well as displays on member profiles that show how often a member travels and hosts and whether a reference has been reciprocated or not. From this feedback of users' activities, those who are obvious freeloaders and are using the service simply to find a free place to stay can be recognized as such" (Lauterbach, et al. 2009, 2).

Wang et al. (2004) compare benefits provided by online travel communities to those of public goods. Public goods are something everyone can benefit from regardless of whether they have contributed to them. They assert "that norms of reciprocity operate as a ubiquitous moral code that imposes a duty to repay, or at least be grateful for benefits received from others in the online travel community" (Wang and Fesenmaier 2004, 719). Furthermore, Pelapret and Brown (2010) define three major aspects of reciprocity. Reciprocity can be seen as action which is ascribed to a symbolic exchange, an action which is intentionally directed at another person in order to get recognized, and that the "symbolic aspect of the mediating objects is critical to understanding how social relations are produced, maintained, or dissolved" (Pelapret and Brown 2010, 5). It is this symbolic exchange, they argue, that necessitates some sort of return. Symbolic goods are not always tangible, but nevertheless through the object, gesture, or service that is exchanged they are crucial in forming some sort of social relations (Pelapret and Brown 2010). And because hospitality and cultural exchange take on the role of symbolic goods, Molz (2007) argues that they should be seen as its own reward.

Deriving from this reciprocity trust is generated as well as solidarity among the members of a hospitality network, and without it they would not function (Molz 2007). In the ideal case, all members at some point will have been or taken on the role of host or guest within their main role as traveller. "In this way, reciprocity becomes a measure of exclusivity; a way of binding those internal to the community while excluding those who are unable or unwilling to reciprocate properly" (Molz 2007, 69). This can easily lead to the problem of freeloaders, who disregard the requirements of reciprocity, therefore defying the purpose and basis of the community

In the following chapters, reciprocity in hospitality networks, information sharing, and rating systems will be discussed.

2.3.1 Reciprocity in hospitality exchange

Reciprocity is a voluntary action within the hospitality network community regardless if it concerns hosting, surfing, giving feedback, or whether one is an active or passive part in group discussion boards and offline gatherings. The system relies on community spirit and that members share it and hence participate and contribute accordingly. Two kinds of reciprocity can be found in hospitality online communities: direct reciprocity and general reciprocity (see Lauterbach et al., 2009; Teng, 2010; Dellarocas et al., 2008; etc.).

Direct reciprocity in the sense of, "I surf your couch you surf mine" occurs but is less common than general reciprocity, and not necessarily expected, as noted by Lauterbach et al. (2009). Yet, they observed in their study based on data supplied by The CouchSurfing Project that direct reciprocity took place in approximately 12 to 18% of the visits. However, this number is an estimate as reports of exchanges, i.e. references, are often neglected or only one-sided (Lauterbach, et al. 2009).

In the case of general reciprocity, Lauterbach et al. suggest that the motivation for it is that "people offer help because others have helped them in the past and they expect others will help them again in the future" (Lauterbach, et al. 2009, 2). Tran (2009) proposes a similar idea, referring to it as the concept of "paying it forward" which has been made popular by Catherine Ryan Hyde, meaning that the good that has been done to you can be repaid by doing good to others. In addition, concepts such as "paying it forward" are non-immediate reciprocal transactions therefore fall into the same category as general reciprocity which helps to generate trust (Tran 2009, 4-5). Nevertheless, it is a fragile basis on which hospitality encounters are based on. The symmetry can always shift and tilt if one side is only taking without paying it back or forward. Therefore the reference system can act as a surveillance mechanism for past behaviours and activities between members (Molz 2007).

While the hospitality network at large underlies general reciprocity, the hospitality encounter (host meets guest) is a direct reciprocal exchange that although no hosting in return is expected, being "guest" at a strangers place still implies to follow a few rules in order "to pay back" directly one's hospitality. Nonetheless, in both cases we find an ambiguous value of what is exchanged. Pelapret and Brown (2010) explain that, as the histories of reciprocal exchange have shown, this ambiguous value is not something one can put a price on and therefore the other does not expect to get exactly the same. In fact, they argue, that this ambiguity "makes a 'benefit and loss' measurement by actors impossible" (Pelapret and

Brown 2010, 5). Hence the exchange is not seen in terms of individual benefits but as symbolic exchange which supports Molz (2007) argument that cultural exchange and hospitality should be seen as its own reward within the hospitality context. "What is important is not an equivalence of value but rather that the *requirements of reciprocity* are met. Reciprocal exchanges can continue successfully even though they appear 'unequal' in some way or another" but it is necessary that one "recognizes the symbolic worth of the exchange" in order for it to continue (Pelapret and Brown 2010, 5).

2.3.2   Motives for participation and reciprocity in online behaviour

While hospitality and cultural exchange should be seen as the reward of hospitality networks members of online communities can have different motivations in participating. Lampel and Bhalla (2007) assume that individual motivation to contribute information, to what they refer as gift giving, is influenced mainly by "factors such as altruism, norms of reciprocity, the building of positive self-image, seeking status through reputation enhancement, and an interest in promoting certain products" (Lampel and Bhalla 2007, 442). Also Dellarocas et al. (2004) identify similar motives, where participation is directed by altruistic motives or purely selfish motives.

Within the context of hospitality exchange, selfish motives can be seen in terms of merely finding free accommodation, without paying it forward. Those are cases where one side does not meet the requirements of participation, thus those members are deemed as freeloaders if the selfish motivation is revealed by other members. Or in terms of ratings and reputation, selfish motivation is to leave positive feedback regardless of the experience, expecting that the positive reference will be reciprocated with the intent to increase the user's own reputation. Also, selfish motives can be compared to a theory of charity, where people contribute in order to increase their own social status (Dellarocas, Fan and Wood 2004).

One of the negative aspects of reciprocity is, as pointed out by Dellarocas et al. (2004) who refer to Fehr and Gachter (2000), that it "represents a pattern of behaviour where people respond to friendly or hostile actions with similar actions even if no material gains are expected" (Dellarocas, Fan and Wood 2004, 5). Those behavioural patterns may explain the fear of retaliatory references but from it also derives the "paying it forward" concept encouraged by hospitality networks.

Another motivation for participation in online communities can be the motive of altruism. Differing from purely selfish motives and reciprocity, altruism is not aimed at individuals but rather toward the community as a whole as findings show (Dellarocas, Fan and Wood 2004). Dellarocas et al. (2004) base their argumentation on Becker (1974), stating that "Altruistic behaviour is explained by the assumption that an agent's utility is positively correlated to the utility of the receiver of the agent's actions. The hypothesis that people are altruistic has a long tradition in economics and has been used to explain charitable donations and the voluntary provision of public goods" (Dellarocas and Wood 2008, 4). Also altruism and active participation can be explained by a feeling of affiliation or belonging which is produced by the community. Altruism and contribution can also create a sense of status by demonstrating one's knowledge or the competence in helping others (Lampel and Bhalla 2007).

2.3.3 Reciprocity in information sharing

Information sharing not only takes place in form of safety functions such as the friend-links, profile information, references, and vouches within the hospitality network but also in form of private messages and in discussion groups among members. As Pelapret and Brown state (2010), discussion forums are the most visible form of information sharing and simultaneously as diverse as there are topics. They identify different social phenomena that emerge through interaction in discussion forums, which can range from communitarian, cooperative, pluralistic, democratic, reflective, to competitive features and often different forms within the same group are mixed (Pelapret and Brown 2010, 6).

To take an example that explains the motivation for participating in discussion forums, e.g. in country or town specific discussion groups within the CouchSurfing network and online travel communities people often ask for tourism related information. Questions in discussion groups also often evolve around information which could easily be found on the internet by using a search engine. Therefore, Pelapret and Brown (2010) refer to Kollock (1999) who asks "why any online social activity exists at all when, for example, responding to other's requests for help provides no immediate return benefit [?]" (Pelapret and Brown 2010, 3).

Pelapret and Brown (2010) claim that online forums are spaces of "encounter", which explains members' participation. Asking questions in online forums which could also be looked up elsewhere is personal and serves to create community through reciprocity. And according to Kollock (1999) as referred to by Pelapret and Brown, the costs of responding to those inquiries are low for the respondent if he/she already possesses the knowledge (Pelapret and Brown 2010, 3). Further motivations of the respondent can be explained by the motives already stated above, namely response as reciprocal action, selfish motives, for example guided by status seeking, or altruistic motives, in which case the participant would produce a "public good" by posting in the online forum (Lampel and Bhalla 2007; Pelapret and Brown 2010).

Lampel and Bhalla (2007) point out that research has mainly focused on altruism and reciprocity as factors which sustain social interaction in virtual communities, while motivations such as status and reputation building, which would contradict the motives of altruism and reciprocity, have been neglected. They explain this ambiguity by referring to Avery et al. (1999), writing that "the practice of online gift giving in the form of advice and opinion illustrates this bias, precisely because at first sight it fits so well explanations of virtual communities that emphasize egalitarian and altruistic motivation" (Lampel and Bhalla 2007, 435).

Virtual communities at large combine the feature of anonymity; however this is less the case within the environment of a hospitality online network as participants may meet offline at some point. Therefore the question arises of what motivates individuals to give "the gift of information" freely? Lampel and Bhalla (2007) draw comparisons to offline communities where altruism and reciprocity in form of social exchange motivate gift giving. From there they conclude that both factors may also operate in virtual communities, and that self-interest is used as further interpretation when altruism is not visible. Furthermore, they claim that status and status seeking are the reasons for "gift giving" in virtual communities. The issue of reputation and status will be discussed in more detail below. Meanwhile, Lampel and Bhalla (2007) write that

> because status seeking online cannot be done by display or by asserting rank, it takes a different form of identity enactment: The gift comes with a message about the gift giver, a message that contains the identity that the giver wants to establish as a way of communicating status. The power of this process and the reason that it can sustain gift giving resides in the fact that the persuasiveness of the message as a way of seeking status does not depend on direct interaction with the receiver of this information. (Lampel and Bhalla 2007, 450)

Information is not only available for the one asking the question but becomes a general good which is viewable for every group member. Lampel and Bhalla (2007) claim that "gift giving" is influenced by status seeking and self-interest and Dellarocas et al. (2004) argue in a similar way, writing that self-interest is what largely drives the motivation behind voluntary participation in online feedback mechanisms.

2.4 Reputation and status

Reputation and status play a vital role in online communities and more in particular, in the CouchSurfing network as it is based on reputational systems which help to build up trust. Concerns about reputational damage emerge frequently especially in discussion groups among CouchSurfing members. As mentioned in Chapter 2.2, CouchSurfing as an online hospitality network falls into the category of a relational community, based on shared values, goals, information sharing, and interests, as referred to by Rosen et al. (2011). They further suggest that those communities develop a hierarchy, as this form of community is further "divided into four tiers and is organized in the form of a pyramid. As one moves up the pyramid, focus shifts from the community to the individual and the tiers become more specific" (Rosen, Lafontaine and Hendrickson 2011, 5). Hence, the further up one moves in the network, the better one's credibility becomes (if it is supported by positive ties) and the better one ranks within the community.

Reputation in CouchSurfing is constituted of varying factors. First of all the time factor should be taken into consideration - the time it takes to build up an elaborate and trustworthy CS profile (i.e. personal description, photographs). This is most importantly achieved by the number of ties one has, ties in form of vouches, friend-links, and references left by both, hosts and guests. Swamynathan et al. (2010) point out that a member's reputation is constituted of the history of the feedback of past interactions he/she has received and the longer the user is a member of an online community, the more interactions and, theoretically, the more accurate a user's reputation will become. On the other hand, the number of ties also diminishes the fact whether a person has been a member from the very beginning or joined more recently as the time that has been invested into the community seems to be the more decisive factor. For example, a person who has been a member for 4 years but only hosted 5

people thus ranks lower than someone who joined 6 months ago but already hosted 20 people and respectively received (positive) feedback from them.

With increased participation within the network, which becomes especially apparent in members activity within certain group forums with the focus on CS concerns, i.e. Couchsurfing – Advice for Hosts, Couchsurfing - Advice for Surfers, etc, a person's status can grow as the "status of members is one outcome of integrating one's need with those of others in the community" (Hersberger, Rioux and Cruitt 2005, 7). Hence member's who are known to relate and affiliate more closely with the network than others - through their interaction in group forums - can also increase their social status.

Nevertheless, in the very beginning every new member in a (hospitality) online network is confronted with what Swamynathan et al. (2010) call *cold-start* problem, where new members have added difficulties in interacting with other members as they have not build up any reputation yet, meaning they have a smaller amount of recourses, i.e. friend-links, references, vouches. This "lack of experience" within the hospitality network can lead to struggles and increased difficulties especially in terms of gaining trust of other members as they still have to prove themselves trustworthy. In terms of CS, new members are more likely to struggle due to their limited number of recourses when trying to find a host or connect with other members.

2.5 Feedback systems and reciprocity in ratings

The same attributes that are ascribed to information sharing are valid for contribution and reciprocity in references, or more precisely, as referred to by Dellarocas (2004), "reputation systems". The term of reputation systems describes the "mechanisms that allow community participants to rate the activities and contributions of others in the community" (Lampel and Bhalla 2007, 439). Therefore the term already implies that reputation plays an important role within online communities. According to Resnick et al. (2000) reputation systems require at least three features in order to function, which include: long-lived online profiles with the prospect of future interaction, distribution of feedback to show present and previous interactions, i.e. showing a participants history, and the use of feedback should help to differentiate between trustworthy and untrustworthy members (see Resnick et al. 2000; Swamynathan et al. 2010).

Furthermore, Resnick et al. (2000) point out three frequently occurring problems related to online feedback and reputational systems, which are still a main concern for online community networks today. First, users may not bother to provide feedback at all. If the service exchange has been successful why waste more time on it. This is where feedback would be motivated by altruistic motives or selfish motives, where feedback is either presented as public good or with an intended reciprocal outcome. Consequently Dellarocas, et al. (2008) claim, that not every transaction receives feedback because online feedback mechanisms do rely on voluntary self-reporting of transaction outcomes (Dellarocas and Wood 2008, 2). As a result and to support their claim, in a quantitative study conducted with 527 CouchSurfing members Adamic et al. (2011) found out that 55.3% of the respondents always leave a reference after they have surfed or hosted, and 35.6% replied that they would leave references most of the time (Adamic, et al. 2011).

A second more important issue, which is more difficult according to Resnick et al. (2000), is to obtain negative feedback. After unsatisfactory transaction users may stay quiet to avoid further inconvenience or out of fear of a retaliatory reference. That way discontent stays invisible. There might be communication between the two parties after an unsatisfied experience but it seems that only really bad experiences are given a negative reference (see Resnick et al. 2000; Adamic et al. 2011; Dellarocas et al. 2008; Dellarocas et al. 2004). As Dellarocas, et al. (2008) state, people seem to be more willing to report extreme experiences, really good or really bad, than average ones. Therefore dissatisfied traders are reluctant and may remain silent if the transaction had no severe negative outcome (Dellarocas and Wood 2008). This is supported by Adamic, et al. (2011) who confirm that faceted ratings present challenges for the user, "including differentiating and quantifying inherently subjective feelings such as friendship and trust, concern over a friend's reaction to a rating, and knowledge of how ratings can affect others' reputations" (Adamic, et al. 2011, 1). CouchSurfing members have stated in qualitative studies that not leaving a reference has been influenece by concerns of receiving a retaliatory reference, concern about one's own or the other members reputation, or doubts of whether the negative/neutral perceived experience one had might not be representative for others (see Tran 2009; Tan 2010; Bialski et al. 2010; Teng et al. 2010; Adamic et al. 2011). Combining the reasons of point one and two may explain the reluctance in leaving negative feedback. In addition this may further be increased by guidelines given by the CouchSurfing network itself. According to CouchSurfing, leaving a negative reference should be considered carefully and only after contacting the person by personal message through the CS network. In their reference instructions they emphasize that

the members should consider personal and cultural differences, and in general when leaving a reference for another member it states in bold letters that "It is VERY important that you only leave references for people you feel you REALLY know" (The CouchSurfing Project 2013b). With all the concerns mentioned above, one may not seem it worth it to go through the trouble of contacting the person in order to solve any kind of dispute that might have occurred.

As third point mentioned by Resnick, et al. (2000) is the problem of ensuring honesty in references because false accounts unrelated to one's previous performance can be given. The problem of ensuring honesty is heavily related and directly influenced by points one and two. The trouble of ensuring honesty can be influenced for example in a case where a positive reference can be posted in order to elicit a positive one in return or blackmail could take place where one threatens to leave negative feedback regardless of the other's previous actions (Resnick, et al. 2000), which relates to the issue of retaliation. Also a small group of new members might collaborate and give each other positive ratings in order to accumulate positive feedback and to increase each other's individual reputation (see also Dellarocas 2000; Resnick et al. 2000; Swamynathan et al. 2010).

Chapter 2.2.2 mentioned different motivations for participation in online communities, and the same motives can be identified for raters and feedback giving which directly relates to Resnick, et al. (2000) and the three main problems related to online feedback stated above. Dellarocas, et al. (2004) name three different kinds of raters:

1. *Self-interested traders* who expect to get benefits out of the transaction either in form of reciprocation or for better future transactions.
2. *Altruists* who like to give and reward the other and
3. *Strong reciprocators* who never rate first but wait what kind of rating they receive in order to adjust their own rating accordingly. (Dellarocas, Fan and Wood 2004, 11)

From those different kind of raters and the problems that are related to feedback giving, an idea about the reliability of online feedback can also be drawn from Dellarocas et al. (2008) and their extensive study about eBay's feedback system. In *The Sound of Silence of Online Feedback (2008)* they refer to several forms of ratings and the prominent problem of *reporting bias* which is influenced by the three factors by Resnick, et al. (2000) which have

been discussed above. The implication that feedback is a voluntary action also implies the different motivations behind the ratings, which are of course unknown to third parties who may take the ratings as basis for judging whether the other user seems to be a reliable partner for transaction or not. Therefore, "if reporting bias is severe enough, public feedback provides a distorted view of the risks that are associated with trading in a given market. Its usefulness, both in deterring fraud and in informing buyers, then becomes severely diminished" (Dellarocas and Wood 2008, 2).

In addition to the difficulties it may cause to leave a reference, the problem is increased by questioning the reliability of the feedback that has been left and how important third parties rate that feedback. Concerning CouchSurfing, Tran (2009) and Tan (2010) both found out in their qualitative studies that users who are looking for a host online, pay more attention to the references left by others on a person's profile and rate them higher in their decision making regardless whether someone seems to be trustworthy or not (Tran 2009; Tan 2010). This argument can be supported by the results of Adamic et al. (2011) quantitative study of CouchSurfing, which showed that users value textual reference higher in their decision making process because they contain a higher range of signals concerning the profile host, than the number of vouches or friendship connections. Consequently, in their survey "47.6% rated [references] as "very important" and another 40.8% as "important"" (Adamic, et al. 2011, 8). But then again, as Dellarocas et al. (2008) state in their findings related to eBay, the majority of positive feedback does not prove to be very useful as most of the information is in some sense standardized. This has also been mentioned by CouchSurfing members in the study conducted by Adamic et al. (2011), where members suggested that most of the positive references sound pretty much the same and that it is more important to read between the lines and to look for "hidden signals". This may lead to the assumption that given feedback is influenced by self-motivation, altruism, or reciprocity, and furthermore relates to the matter of biased references.

2.5.1 Reporting bias in online feedback

The issue of biased references has been pointed out as foremost problem in online feedback because, as Dellarocas et al. (2008) claim, "feedback in most systems is overwhelmingly positive. For example, more than 99% of all feedback posted on eBay is positive" (Dellarocas and Wood 2008, 2). The same can be said about the CouchSurfing network. The overall CS statistics state that approximately 6,054,182 million positive experiences took place as of March 2013, and approximately 3.7 million successful encounters among more than 3.2 million members can be related to them (The CouchSurfing Project 2013).

As of date, the new updated CS statistics on the homepage are now merely focused on positive experience sharing and to create a positive community image. All numbers regarding positive or negative experiences have been omitted and the former statistic has been replaced by an info graphic as of November 2013[4]. It now states the overall number of CS experiences – more than 20 million – and supports an overly positive community image by stating facts like most languages spoken by a single surfer, most couches surfed by a member, amount of weekly city events that take place, etc. In what form, or what counts as an experience is not clear.

With the lack of an actual current number, I will refer here to the data given by Tran (2009) and Adamic et al. (2011). Also several other studies stated that the overall numbers of positive and negative references (see Adamic et al. 2011; Rosen et al. 2011; Strommer 2010; Tan 2010; Teng et al. 2010; Tran 2009) shows more than 99% of positive references in comparison to neutral and negative ones. According to the statistics given by Tran from the year 2009, CouchSurfing displayed "3,090,401 positive experiences, which is an incredibly high 99.808 percent of all member experiences!" (Tran 2009, 83). Since then the number of members has tripled, but as confirmed by Teng et al. (2010) the ratio of positive to negative references is still valid, namely 2,500:1. Although CS provides the best preconditions, a number that high is unlikely. Therefore the assumption, members tend to leave in case of a neutral or negative experience no reference at all because they fear any inconvenience it may cause, i.e. to receive retaliatory reference in return. Therefore the high number of positive references can be explained by silent transactions as described by Dellarocas et al. (2008) in their study regarding eBay's feedback system, which shows similar positive rating statistics (Dellarocas and Wood 2008). Adamic et al. (2011) confirm this in their quantitative survey

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[4] https://www.couchsurfing.org/statistics (accessed November 15, 2013)

based on the CouchSurfing community, revealing that some of the "missing" references, those which have not been reciprocated or where members answered that they sometimes do not leave a reference at all, concern negative or neutral experiences which have not been reported (Adamic, et al. 2011).

In addition, in their previous study, Teng et al. (2010) state that neutral references are rare. They found out that "91.2% of neutral/non-references stem from individuals who are friends, [and] we believe that this category is composed mostly of missing data" (Teng, Lauterbach and Adamic 2010, 3). This frequently occurred before 2008 for the reason that if the reference giver forgot to select what type of reference he is giving, the value automatically was set to neutral. This has been changed since then and now the system demands a selection. Therefore they conclude that "it appears that the primary utility of references is as a count of the number of positive experiences rather than a balance between positive and negative" (Teng, Lauterbach and Adamic 2010, 3). The negligence of negative and neutral references in the CouchSurfing statistics therefore serves two purposes; it emphasizes the degree of positive experiences, while simultaneously the reputation of the community is increased. Creating a positive community image is pivotal, as it increases the number of participants and the level of trustworthiness. By creating a positive community image, ascribing a community with what can also be referred to as initial trust, new members are attracted and the growth of the community is ensured. If the community itself has an ensuring trustworthy reputation, then this also may reflect on its members. Ba (2001) suggests that users who want to be perceived as trustworthy and avoid from being cheated, are more willing to join a community that has a good reputation through which they can achieve former. Also online communities with a steadily growing number of members, present a more reassuring image compared to others with a smaller amount of members.

So how can this high number of positive experiences be explained? According to Dellarocas et al. (2008) the case of reporting bias is a difficult one and, as mentioned in the examples of different raters and motivations in participation in online communities, it can have a number of multifaceted causes. Many of those difficulties have already been named above; from a hesitance to convey bad news, the silence of the transaction altogether, to fear of retaliation by the other party, selfish and altruistic motives, means of reciprocity - voluntary or intrinsic to the system, or shortcomings in the feedback mechanism itself. In this sense, Dellarocas et al. (2008) remark that one of the problems of feedback mechanism is that they do not publicly reveal the number of silent transactions that has taken place.

The quantitative survey of CouchSurfing conducted by Adamic et al. (2011) disclosed that of the 527 respondents "84.9% had never left a negative or neutral reference, while according to the ratings dataset users leave a positive reference for 87.7% of those they host, and for 90.1% of those who host them" (Adamic, et al. 2011, 6). But, as they emphasize further, obviously not all experiences have been positive. As reasons for not leaving a reference, Adamic et al. state that "51.3% listed being too busy as one of the reasons, but 31.7% had had a neutral experience and another 12.1% had had a negative experience" (Adamic, et al. 2011, 6). Those findings not only correspond to Resnick et al. (2000) mentioned problems for rating system, but Adamic et al. also conclude that reciprocity plays one of the main factors in the practical absence of negative reference on CouchSurfing. In addition, they support their findings by referring to their previous study (Teng, Lauterbach and Adamic 2010), which showed that ratings show a higher reciprocity and are more positive, if the rating has been conducted publicly, in comparison to anonymous and private trust ratings.

As fear of retaliation has been widely publicized as an important reason behind people's reluctance to report negative outcomes (see Tran 2009; Dellarocas and Wood 2008), Teng et al. (2010) wonder "whether there might be a higher number of negative references given on CouchSurfing, were the option of privately expressing dissatisfaction available" (Teng, Lauterbach and Adamic 2010, 3). The suggestion of an anonymous feedback system has often been mentioned in CS discussion groups. Yet, CouchSurfing maintains it rating system and as reasons for a non-anonymous reference system The CouchSurfing Project states in its advice for references:

> Nope! Our community holds everyone accountable for their own words. This encourages honesty and open communication between members. Please note that if you make a false profile in order to leave a reference for someone, it is a violation of our Terms of Use and could result in your removal from the community. (The CouchSurfing Project 2013b)

However, the findings of Adamic et al. (2011) and the problem of biased references may lead to scepticism whether this approach is successful or not. Consequently they assert that on the one hand the CouchSurfing system seems to work well, which is proven by the number of members and amount of CS experiences that have taken place, but on the other hand, their findings demonstrate that there are several key issues which affect how easily and accurately ratings are given, which directly influences their perceived utility, as confirmed by

users who refer to the importance of looking for "hidden signals" when reading references (Adamic, et al. 2011). This statement corresponds to Resnick et al. (2000) and their suggested three frequently appearing problems which lead to cause dishonesty or silent transactions between members of online communities, which in return can influence a biased reference and reputation system.

2.5 Conclusion

In the literature review the basic concepts of online (hospitality) communities have been explored. It began with an exploration of which trust mechanisms are innate to the CouchSurfing community and that those mechanisms form the basis for some form of initial trust.

Furthermore, in order for an online community to function, a certain degree of participation is important as is the investment of time into the network. It takes time to form positive ties, which is one of the essential mechanisms to create trust among its members. The creation of ties helps to establish a user's reputation and status, which will make him move up in the hierarchy.

A necessary factor is that the requirements of reciprocity are met. General reciprocity guarantees that trust is built in creating ties and solidarity which will make the system work. It has been pointed out that reciprocity is a difficult issue especially in terms of references because of the expected reciprocal exchange which can also take on forms of retaliation and dishonesty/bias. Therefore, in order for a reputational system to function, long-lived online profiles are vital as they show a member's history and give feedback to other members.

Concluding it can be said, that reciprocity, reputation, and status are tightly interconnected and directly influence each other and the decision making process of the users within the online hospitality network.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In the following chapter the methodology used in this study will be discussed and an overview of the data collection method is given. This will be used to address the research question and eventually lead to the data analysis process.

3.1 Research design

This case study of CouchSurfing follows a qualitative approach. According to Snape and Spencer (2003) one of the methodological stances of qualitative research is to adapt a research method which is flexible and adapts to the social context in which the data is produced. As a result is should produce a 'rounded understanding' of the participants and their actions in the social setting (Snape and Spencer 2003).

A combined method approach has been used to get a better insight into the issue of negative experiences and decision making on CouchSurfing. It draws on multiple perspectives by including various theoretical texts as background (see Chapter 2) and generated data which results from a qualitative survey in form of an online questionnaire. In addition, some of the results are further supported by observational findings gathered from discussion boards within the CS community. Frequent discussions in group forums of Couchsurfing – Advise for Hosts and Couchsurfing – Advice for Surfers have been the initial reason for the research interest, as some of the main themes are host/surfer reciprocity, failed expectations and concerns of how to deal with negative experiences. Furthermore, this natural occurring data, as referred to by Ritchie (2003), "provides an 'enactment' of social phenomena in their original settings" (Ritchie 2003, 45).

More commonly, according to Snape and Spencer (2003) "qualitative research is a naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values etc.) within their social

worlds" (3) and its aims are "directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world, by learning about people's social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories" (Snape and Spencer 2003, 22). Also Denzing and Lincoln (2000) define qualitative research as an activity that locates the observer in the world" and which comes with "a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. [...] This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them." (Denzin and Lincoln (eds.) 2000, 3).

Respectively this study takes an interpretivist approach. However, the problem with interpretivism according to Snape and Spencer (2003) is that "facts and values are not distinct and findings are inevitably influenced by the researcher's perspective and values [...] although the researcher can declare and be transparent about his or her assumptions" (Snape and Spencer 2003, 17).

Deriving from this assumed lack of impartiality is the assumption that the researcher and the community may impact on each other. Snape and Spencer sum up that "consequently the social researcher is concerned to explore and understand the social world using both the participant's and the researcher's understanding" (Snape and Spencer 2003, 17). Therefore emphasis is placed on the interpretative aspects of knowing about the social world and the "significance of the investigator's own understanding of the phenomenon being studies" (Snape and Spencer 2003, 7).

Accordingly, as a longstanding member of CouchSurfing I have a good understanding of how the site works and operates, and what are the concerns and liabilities of the community from a user's point of view. As a result, this helped to define the research question as outlined in Chapter 1 and made me confident to get the needed amount of participants for this study.

3.2 Method of data collection and sampling size

The primary source of data of this study is the outcome of a qualitative questionnaire. These findings will be supported by observational data that can be found in CS discussion groups within the CS network.

In the following, first the primary method – the questionnaire – is described. The observational stance is described briefly after.

For a qualitative study the samples are usually small in size as they yield to be rich in detail. Ritchie et al. (2003) write that "if the data are properly analysed, there will come a point where very little new evidence is obtained from each additional fieldwork unit. [...] There is therefore a point of diminishing return where increasing the sample size no longer contributes new evidence" (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam 2003, 83).

Different ways of data collection methods have been considered, from face-to-face interviews, text based interviews via Skype or msn, or an online questionnaire. As I desired a non-location based and diverse sample size with the only criteria for participants of being that of an active CouchSurfing member, the choice fell on an online questionnaire. One of the considerations was that real time interviews might have been more difficult to achieve due to location and time difference between researcher and subject and possibly would have limited the sample population. The other one was that people might be more willing to describe their negative experiences freely and considerate when they can do so anonymously.

The link for an extensive free-form questionnaire was distributed in six CouchSurfing discussion groups, looking for voluntary participants, with a brief explanation about the purpose of the study, the researcher and university, how the data will be used, an estimate how much time is required to fill it out (about 30 – 40 mins), and an insurance that all data would be handled anonymously and no participants will be identified.

Couchsurfing groups with a high number of members were chosen, i.e. Europe, Couchsurfing - Advice for Hosts, Couchsurfing – Advice for Surfers, Middle East, North America, and Students, in order to increase the likelihood of finding participants and to receive a diverse demographic sample size of age and location.

The choice of distributing the questionnaire publicly would also ensure to get it answered by active CS members, who have an interest in participating in CS in one way or another, as this was the desired target group. If this method would have proven to be without desired outcome the second choice would have been to make use of the snowball technique. The snowball technique is a "method that yields a sample based on referrals made by people who share or know others who present the characteristics that are of research interest".[5]

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[5]   http://projecteuclid.org/DPubS?service=UI&version=1.0&verb=Display&handle=euclid.aoms/1177705148 (accessed 15/01/2013)

Relying on this method of data collection – voluntary online questionnaire - can be unreliable, with little or no outcome at times when it comes to the number of participants and detailed data. But being familiar with the CS community and knowing about the affiliation of active members with the network I was positive to get at least a few thoroughly filled out responses. The link for the survey was available for four days in February 2013 after which it was taken off the group forums because the responses to the survey exceeded the expectations by far. The questionnaire received 68 replies within those four days of which 35 are thoroughly filled out questionnaires where all questions have been answered. Receiving this amount of feedback exceeded the expected sample size for this qualitative study by more than double. But with the received feedback the assumption can be made that the issue of negative experiences proved to be a topic of interest for CS members as well. In the analysis part of this study the attempt is made to get a better idea of emergent concepts, ideas, and patterns for decision-making among CS members (in relation to negative CS experiences). As described by Snape and Spencer, the outputs of qualitative research "tend to focus on the interpretation of social meaning through mapping and 're-presenting' the social world of research participants" (Snape and Spencer 2003, 5).

The observational part of the study "offers the opportunity to record and analyse behaviour and interactions as they occur. [...] This allows events, actions and experiences and so on, to be 'seen' through the eyes of the researcher, often without any construction on the part of those involved." (Ritchie 2003, 35). The information retrieved from observing the public discussions taking place in forums is used to complement the findings of the questionnaire.

3.3 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed with help of a free online survey provider and the link distributed in CS groups as described in 3.2. The questionnaire (see appendix) consisted of four pages, containing 29 questions in total, which attempt to answer the research questions as discussed in Chapter 1:

1. How do negative experiences influence decision-making in an online hospitality network?

2. Information sharing: How are negative experiences and references dealt with and discussed by the community?

The first three questions of the questionnaire were related to optional information of age, gender, and country, followed by a series of multiple-choice and free-form answer questions. Multiple-answer/choice questions were used in those instances where it came to find out about the length of CS membership, number of experiences as host and surfer, in what form the respondent participates within CS, i.e. as host, surfer, in discussion groups, to meet other members offline/online, in organizing meetings, etc., and how important the reference system is for the respondent in searching and evaluating other members profiles. These questions where used to draw a general picture of the member and his/her affiliation and activity within the CS network. The free form questions concerned the issue of negative experiences and how, if they have taken place, have they influenced the participant's actions and choices within the community. The questions aim to investigate the considerations in terms of receiving and leaving negative references, whether these are discussed with the community and how they influence decision-making in terms of retaliation, reputation and status when confronted with them. The last two questions attempt to investigate how negative experience with the community have or might influence further participation within the hospitality network.

3.4 Generated data and data analysis

The first step upon obtaining the data was data reduction because "if it has been collected, the data will be rich in descriptive detail and full of explanatory evidence. But, almost inevitably the data will be unwieldy and tangled in its raw form. (Spencer, Ritchie and O'Connor 2003, 209)". The first reduction process of the data took place in form of taking out questionnaires that were only partly filled out and with a lot of blank fields. The original desired sample size for this study was 15-20, however, after reducing the incomplete data it left a sample of 35 fully filled out questionnaires. The amount of this data is able to give an idea about common ideas and attitudes of the respondents and their beliefs and behaviours towards the CouchSurfing project as common themes repeatedly emerged.

Depending on the sample size, a sample that is too small will make it difficult to identify a common pattern, but with an increasing number of participants, at some point the results may start to repeat each other.

The next step in the data analysis process was to identify key themes, concepts, and categories. This process was done manually by looking at certain parts of the raw data separately which had the advantage to get an overview of the overall structure and to put answers into coherent categories, creating a conceptual framework. During this process three key themes emerged which are relevant in answering the research question.

The themes will be discussed and supported by questionnaire and observational findings that have been found on public group discussion forums within the CouchSurfing network. The outcome of the collected data will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Research Results and Discussion

In the following chapter the research results will be presented and the findings will be discussed. Before the analysis part, a short overview of the demographics of the respondents will be given and how active they have been during their time as CouchSurfing members.

The quotes used of the respondents are displayed as given and were not corrected. In some cases spelling mistakes occur or Chat language and abbreviations have been used.

4.1 Demographic data of respondents

The answering of the questionnaire took place anonymously but it contained optional information about age, gender and country of origin, plus the duration of their CS membership and the amount of times they have surfed or hosted. This demographic data offers an idea about the background of participants in this study but is not directly relevant to the content related information.

Table 1: Age demographics

Age	
18 to 24	5
25 to 34	14
35 to 44	7
45 to 54	6
55 to 64	3

Table 2: Gender

Gender	
Female	14
Male	21

How long have you been a member of CS?	
less than 6 months	3
6-12 months	4
1-3 years	18
4-6 years	8
7 years or more	2

As seen on the tables on the previous page, the age span of participants ranges from 18 to 65, whereas the largest age group was with 41% of the respondents those to the 25 to 34 year olds. 21 of the respondents are male, 14 female. Country of origin can be found from all over Europe, U.S, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Australia, India and Indonesia.

Table 3 shows that more than half of the sample size has been a CouchSurfing member for 1-3 years but as mentioned in Chapter 2, the duration of membership not necessarily corresponds to the time invested into the community. Except for 2 members all members have acted as a host, whereas 7 respondents have never "surfed" a couch. See following table.

Table 4: Amount on surfing/hosting experiences

	How many surfers have you hosted?	How many different couches have you surfed?	
None	2	7	
1 to 5	8	17	
6 to 10	7	4	
11 to 20	3	1	
21 to 30	2	1	
31 – 50	3	2	
more than I can count	10	1	

The ways in which the respondents use CouchSurfing differ slightly. Whereas 17 said that they mainly host, 5 preferably surf. Only 2 respondents have never hosted. 12 answered that they about equally surf couches and host people. As additional reasons for using CouchSurfing, 18 of the users stated that they participate in group discussions, 12 remarked

that they like to browse the forums for travel information. On an equal basis, nine of the respondents like to use the group forums for communicating with other members, to meet up and to attend CS related events like gatherings and meetings.

Table 5: Other reasons of CS participation besides hosting/surfing

I participate in group discussions.	18
I use CS groups for finding travel information.	12
I use CS groups to meet people.	9
I attend/ organize CS meetings/ gatherings and activities.	9
To communicate with other members.	9
To affiliate myself with the community.	2

4.2 The reference system as trust generator

As discussed in Chapter 2, the reference system is one of the main trust generating features within the hospitality online community. The first ten questions were posted in form of a multiple choice scale in order to find out the respondents sentiments and affiliation towards the reference and rating system in general. The vast majority of the respondents rated the reference system as very important to important as a tool within the CS community. Only three of the respondents shared a neutral opinion. In general, leaving a reference and reading references before responding to a request were equally highly important. The amount of references a profile shows was still rated as important, but 15 respondents felt rather indifferent towards it. See table 6 below:

Table 6: Importance of reference system

	As how important do you rate the reference system on CS?	Leaving a reference is for you...	Reading references before responding to a request is...	The amount of references a person has is...
very important	23	16	13	1
Important	9	14	20	19
Neutral	3	3	–	11
not important	–	2	2	4

On the other hand, when asked if it is important for them to receive positive references, 27 responded with yes, six did not care and two rated it as not important (see Table 6).

For me to receive positive references is....	
very important	12
Important	15
Neutral	6
not important	2

To write an honest reference about another member is...	
very important	10
important	22
neutral	2
not important	1

Initially, 32 agreed that it is relevant to leave an honest reference for another member (see Table 8). Reasons for giving references range from after a surf/hosting experience, to meeting someone at a CS event or gathering. One person left a reference to someone he had met only online. As other reasons, more than one member stated for leaving a reference: "When he/she is a friend of mine and I find out he/she is part of the CS Community," and "When I've known someone for a long time. Often CS unrelated."

4.2.1 Reference writing patterns and reciprocity

As a starting note, after a hosting/surfing experience that has taken place through the CS network, the CouchSurfing organisation sends out a message as a reminder to leave the other person a reference on their profile. However, in the small print under the reference giving form it states "If you do not have something substantial to say, please leave this blank" (see also Figure 5).
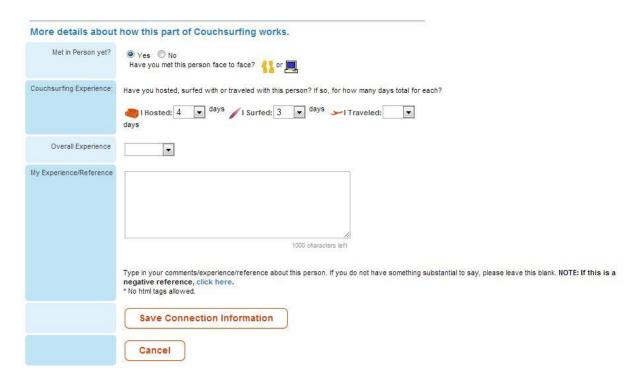
Figure 5: Reference giving form

This remark sounds like an apparent paradox after receiving an encouragement of actually leaving a reference. This is followed by: "If this is a negative reference, please click here". As accessed in March 2013, this link referred you to a page that was asking you if you are really sure of leaving a negative reference and reminded the writer of following the reference guidelines and that the community is based on honesty, trust and respect (The CouchSurfing Project 2013b). As of November 2013 the link directs you to the reference page which reminds the user also about trust, honesty, and respect, and to follow reference guidelines and if a violation takes place, that the reference can be removed.

CouchSurfing offers the possibility that if a member has received a negative reference and feels that it is unjust, to take the case to arbitration. For this, the reference and case has to violate the reference guidelines and for the removal of the reference the receiver has to proof that the other party made a false or harmful statement. As stated on the reference guidelines of CS, "Couchsurfing's default position is to not interfere with reference content left by members. In extremely rare circumstances, Couchsurfing may moderate reference content" (The CouchSurfing Project 2013d). As acceptable reasons are named that the reference causes an obvious violation against the reference guidelines or Terms of Use[6] or that they are "served a court or law enforcement order with a request for removal" (The CouchSurfing Project 2013d). As violation against guidelines several points are named:

_____

[6] https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/terms

- The reference describes someone else's experience who is not a member of CS
- Contains private contact information or describes a private medical condition or legal circumstance
- Are false according to information in the CouchSurfing system
- The reference is anonymous and left from a blank profile
- The reference constitutes harassment through repeated updates
- A member leaving the reference has clearly never interacted directly with the other member

In any of the above cases, the reference guidelines state that the concerned may contact the Safety Team of CouchSurfing in the case of having received an inappropriate reference on his or her own profile (The CouchSurfing Project 2013d). In this case the concerned needs sufficient proof that the reference is wrong. This process takes time and is not always successful.

The frequency of whether a reference is left after a host/surf encounter was answered by 21 of the respondents with "I always leave a reference", whereas seven only sometimes leave a reference. Others specified that they like to wait for the other person to write first and one person bluntly stated: "I dont write a negative reference."

More than once it has been mentioned that leaving a reference depends on the kind of experience the CS members had with each other. Consequently, one respondent makes leaving a reference dependent on how significant the experience was:

If I have something genuinely positive or negative to say (i.e. I think others should know my opinion about a person). So far this has been most of the time.

Respondent #2

Interestingly, despite the high number of respondents who said that they would always leave a reference, when asked more specifically about their reference writing habits different patterns emerged which may influence the reference giving process. One pattern which emerged depends on the role the person who is leaving the reference takes on. In the first pattern, a surfer is expected to write a reference first, while a host waits for the surfer. See some of the answers in the following:

my general rule is: 1) as a surfer, I leave a reference for the host asap 2) as a host, I normally wait for the surfer to leave the reference first. However, if I am particularly impressed by a surfer, I may leave a reference first.

Respondent #6

When I host, I wait for the surfer to leave his/her reference first. Vice versa when I surf: I usually write it earlier.

Respondent #5

As a host i usually wait until the surfer wrote one, i have more than 200 references; if the experience was negativ or neutral and other host should be informed then immediatly.

Respondent #32

When I surfed I try to write a reference first. When hosting, it depends - if the surfer hasn't written a reference after 3-4 days, I'll write one.

Respondent #3

as a host I wait for the other's reference. As a surfer, I write it first.

Respondent #29

Generally I write first, but as host I wait get one, but usually depend how connected I was with that person.

Respondent #17

The second pattern that emerged suggests that reference giving seems to be related to hierarchy. This means that a person with a higher number of references on their profile will react differently in leaving a reference when the other person, who is supposed to receive the reference, has very few or no references at all. One person agreed with the previously mentioned pattern, but mentions that leaving a reference also depends on the "experience" of the other CS member:

when i surf, i would write a reference immediately. when i host - i wait for my CS to leave me a reference, as it's really "their turn" to do this first. if they're new, i would leave a reference first, as perhaps they dont understand the system (or it's like an unwritten rule to me) - i hosted you - so you in return leave a reference for me.

Respondent #27

Others replied that writing always depends on the kind of encounter they have and although it does not matter who is writing first, that the writing pattern is still influenced of whether the other person was a CS novice or not:

It depends on the persons/people whom I am hosting. Sometimes the surfers will ask that I write them a reference before they leave...often this happens because I am their first "Couch Surfing" host...

<div align="right">Respondent #24</div>

It does not really matters. I write when I have time to do it, and when I think it matters: if the person is surfing for the first time I do it quickly because mine is going to be the only one she's got, so it is going to count. If the person was really amazing, I will do it quickly too because people might want to meet her as well!

<div align="right">Respondent #9</div>

While some write reference according to their convenience or when the CS system reminds them about it per email:

I usually do it when the email form CS comes, saying: "Oh, you were supposed to host/surf with this guy. Did you? If you did, write a reference!"

<div align="right">Respondent #20</div>

Nine people stated that they try to be first in leaving a reference and try to "get to it" as soon as possible after a host/surf exchange. On the other hand, reciprocity seems to be a relevant factor for others when giving a reference. Eight of the respondents said that they prefer to wait for the other person to leave a reference first, either because they want to see what the other one has to say, or from the perspective of the host they expect is as part of the general exchange (see also answer of respondent #27):

This really depends on the circumstances. If I had a blast, i´ll usually write the reference very fast. If I had an alright-encounter I sometimes wait what the other person has to say, before replying rather neutral. It always depends on my accessibility to computers though...

<div align="right">Respondent #7</div>

wait until one is recieved as im a host and many surfers do not bother.

<div align="right">Respondent #21</div>

i write one when they write me one or when they ask for it.

<div align="right">Respondent #34</div>

In summary it can be said, that although the majority of respondents strives to always leave a reference, the reference giving process is highly influenced by the kind of encounter that took place (more about this in the following chapter) and by factors such as hierarchy and reciprocity. Also unwritten rules, or rather expectations, that CS members seem to have among themselves of "who has to write first" emerged. As part of the reciprocal exchange, some hosts seem to expect their surfers to write a reference first as a form of "thank you" or reward for their hospitality.

4.3 Encountering negative experiences

As described in Chapter 2.4.1 the CouchSurfing network is dominated by an overwhelming amount of positive references. Nevertheless, negative references are still common. Although the CS community tries to focus on the positive experiences, negative ones are also highly discussed in CS group forums such as Couchsurfing - Advice for Hosts, Couchsurfing - Advice for Surfers, Negative References, etc. (more about this in chapter 4.5 Discussion). The following section deals with the answers of the respondents towards their attitude of encountering a negative reference in a profile and how they react if they are met by it either in form of a couch request or while looking for a host.

When it happens that someone encounters a negative reference half of the respondents agree that the natural thing to do is to read the references of both parties and try to understand what happened and to put it into a context. When coming across a negative reference most of the respondents have similar strategies and describe their reaction as follows:

> At first intrigued, but I don't judge until I read the content of the reference, compare it with the other references to see if it is genuine and if the complaint is really so bad as to deserve a neg reference.
>
> Respondent #2

> Read through it thoroughly, also check the profile of the person who left the reference - maybe they frequently leave negatives, or come across as a person with wildly different standards than my own?
>
> Respondent #3

> I read closely and try to understand exactly what happened. Sometimes its just a personal feud and doesn´t concern CS at all.
>
> Respondent #8

I read it very carefully. I think people that are easily displeased are more than those who are bad hosts/surfers. And hopefully most of the times you can see through a comment regarding that.

<div align="right">Respondent #20</div>

I read to evaluate the situation and compare with the positive one and see the datas and so on, it is complexe to set a standard, but usually I avoid people with negative reference, unless I find out what happened and decided that the person was actually a victim.

<div align="right">Respondent #17</div>

First, I look at the profile of the person who left the negative reference. Then, I re-read the profile of the person who received the negative reference to see if the problem could impact me. Chances are good I would not host that person.

<div align="right">Respondent #32</div>

It is important to always read both parties as there are always two sides to every story. Also the content of a reference is highly decisive. As one member puts it:

It depends on the content. If the reference says: Is really a sexual predator looking for young children, I would not want to meet this person. If it mentions something about arriving late, I would consider meeting this person still.

<div align="right">Respondent #25</div>

When confronted in form of a surf request by a person that has a negative reference on their profile, half of the respondents would employ a similar strategy in their decision making process as stated above. The decision of whether a person would be accepted as guest would then also depend on the seriousness of reference.

Yes, it all depends on the circumstances and how bad the negative reference was. Sometimes people mention outright that they are not supersocial, so a negative reference about their shyness and unwillingness to communicate would have no impact on me.

<div align="right">Respondent #7</div>

Depends what kind of negatice reference it is. If that person had bad behavior, or was rude or left a mess or stole something etc. I wouldn't host him/her.

<div align="right">Respondent #23</div>

depends on the contents of the reference and how plausible it is (I would also check the profile of the CSer who left the reference)

<div align="right">Respondent #6</div>

> Sure. Unless they have something really terrible written there, like crime related stuff or total and complete unpleasantness or unclealiness.

<div align="right">Respondent #11</div>

In general all respondents apply similar strategies when coming across a negative reference. It is handled by employing close reading strategies to take both sides into consideration and it also has to be differentiated of how severe a negative reference is. Another factor is the amount of positive versus negative references on a profile. A negative reference seems to weigh heavier the fewer references a profile has in total. As a few members state:

> If it's one in many, yes. If it's one in a few, I'll still respond but not sure if I'll host.

<div align="right">Respondent #29</div>

> If he/she has only one negative reference between many positive, I think it's just a missunderstand with another user or so, if he/she has plenty of negative references I just decline the request.

<div align="right">Respondent #31</div>

> If the person asked for a host, I will not host him if he has a more negative reference than positive, else I will accept to host him and see

<div align="right">Respondent #35</div>

Despite the general attitude of close reading and open- mindedness when confronted with a negative reference, some of the respondents became more cautious when they were asked of whether they would host someone who has left negative references to others. As a negative reference is not expected to be given lightly this might possibly affect their own list of references. Five people evaluate and value an honest reference, even if negative, and therefore would consider the person if that is the case.

> Of course. I don't care if they leave me a negative reference too if their experience has been negative. As long as they're honest about what happened so as not to lie about their experience.

<div align="right">Respondent #11</div>

> I would still host the person. Leaving a negative reference for someone else is not a bad thing, it is an honest thing if true.

<div align="right">Respondent #23</div>

However, others were more critical:

> If I think the negative reference is honest yes, but if he/she regularly give negative references then I don't respond.
>
> <div align="right">Respondent #31</div>

> Yes, but depending on what was said. If the surfer has left 3 references and all 3 are negative for what I consider small misunderstandings, I would not. Especially not if they are about hosts and small misunderstandings.
>
> <div align="right">Respondent #25</div>

> It says a lot if that person has a whole bunch of negative references to other people. If they have left more than a few I would probably not host them as I would think that they are probably a difficult person to get along with.
>
> <div align="right">Respondent #2</div>

> Yes, still it depends of what he wrote: if he complains about something that for me does not seem fair, I would probably not want to host him.
>
> <div align="right">Respondent #9</div>

Interestingly enough, the opinions shifted when the respondents were asked to take on the role of the surfer. When leaving the comfort of their own home, the CouchSurfing members were more careful in considering someone as host who has a negative reference on their profile. Nine of the CS members simply answered with No and they would not consider the person's profile, or as one person put it:

> Probably not. I can afford to stay in hotels and hostels and don't need to "risk it".
>
> <div align="right">Respondent #32</div>

While only three people replied that they would not have a problem with it, the majority agreed that it highly depends on the nature of the reference and how serious it is. Also the amount of references the profile has in total has to be considered, and then to weigh the negative one versus the positive ones.

> Same as above, if it's just one negative reference between many positives then yes, if there's only negatives no.
>
> <div align="right">Respondent #31</div>

> depends on how many neg has and how bad they are. Example: "He didnt let us grab food from the fridge" I dont see it as bad but... "He stole money from my bag" or "was digging in my backpack".. Now, that#s bad

<div align="center">53</div>

Depending on the reference. If it is about slight sexual harassment or sth, NOT. If its about organizational problems, not showing up, etc, I would probably mention it in the couch request to obtain more information.

It depends on what the negative reference is about. If it's crime related stuff or total and complete and unacceptable unpleasantness, I wouldn't send them a couch request.

Concluding it can be said that the participants seemed more open minded towards hosting someone who has had a bad experience or caused one for others, if the violation of trust was not serious and can be traced back to minor misunderstandings, being unpunctual, etc. However, the respondents seemed more cautious in their consideration when they where to leave the safety of their own home.

4.4 Negative experiences and consequences

In the following section personal negative experiences of CS members will be discussed. In the questionnaire, the experiences were divided of whether the experience took place as host or surfer. Both will be discussed in separate parts. First the experience, and the members decision in form of leaving a reference. After that, member's considerations in terms of leaving negative references will be discussed. The consecutive section will look at how they deal with a negative experience and the consequences they have drawn from it.

4.4.1   Negative experiences as host

The main section of the questionnaire asked the CS members if they had a negative hosting experience in the past, and if that was the case, could they describe it. Two of the respondents had never hosted while five stated that they never had any bad experiences as a host. However, all of the other respondents described cases that made them feel uncomfortable or which they would classify as bad.

No very serious cases like personal harm or sexual harassment were mentioned. Only one person actually mentioned a bad incident that even went public in and outside of the CS community. However the negative experience did not actually happen while hosting the person, but she started a series of abusive messages towards him in private and publicly on a CS discussion forum. In this case, the CS administrator helped to resolve the issue as stated by the respondent:

> I had a very negative experience with a known abuser. Both left references but I took the case to arbitration The abusing surfer was then dismissed from site and all references were removed by board from CS.org
>
> Respondent #19

The process of arbitration is described in section 4.2.1 as included in the reference guidelines. In the previously mentioned case, the concerned member had sufficient proof of verbal abuse that was left against him on public discussion forums. Some of the other cases were not as severe as the former one. In four of the cases the host felt that he/she simply did not connect with the person or that the difficulty was due to personal differences. As one host puts it:

> Yes, i did have a couple of bad experiences but I didnt feel like writing a negative reference as they are not harmful but I guess I expected them to be my ways(being clean/time of arrival/no show) which I feel is wrong to judge a person.
>
> Respondent #18

A fair amount of the problems mentioned was caused by surfers who did not show up at all or were late. As this seems to violate not only rules of politeness but also apparent (unwritten) CS host/guest agreements a couple of the respondents felt strongly about it:

> of my two hosting experiences, the second was more difficult (mother and son) who arrived VERY late= and then expected to sleep longer in the morning although I had already told them that I would have to be up and out of the house early due to my schedule. They did get moving, although it was more of a bed and not any chance for good conversation.
>
> Respondent #26

> left one negativ for not turning up and informing about it, i find this behaviuor rude.
>
> Respondent #1

Yes. People not showing up or showing up in numbers different than announced (4 instead than 1)

<div align="right">*Respondent #8*</div>

yes, I have hosted a girl from mexico, and as she was hunguing out alone, we had a date to meet in the evening, for exemple : at 11 pm near Eglise, but she was always late, and one day i was waiting for her more than an hour and half, I think its bad, I classify it as a negative experience

<div align="right">*Respondent #35*</div>

The biggest number of cases was hosts feeling like their surfers were merely using them either in terms of free accommodation or actual goods. The expectations of the hospitality exchange had not been met and the surfers were described as freeloaders in the following cases:

I had only one that I would describe as negative. Well I host people not because I want to give people a free home, but because I want to meet people, and exchange with. There are two girls that I hosted for which it was not the case, as we had the feeling that they just wanted to stay together and that is all.

<div align="right">*Respondent #9*</div>

yes, two guys kept on talking in their own language all the time (a language I don't understand) and they didn't communicate at all with me and didn't show interest in it. I felt like an unwanted person in my own home - awful! I hosted them and I usually wait for the surfers reference first. As they didn't leave me one, I also didn't reference them. In the end, they were not dangerous or anything, they just didn't communicate. As a host in a highly sought after location and a woman living alone, I get a lot of requests from people showing sexual interest in me. I just decline them, but I don't reference them, as I never meet them in person, and I only give references to people after meeting them face to face.

<div align="right">*Respondent #4*</div>

yes ones meet ones girl from canada she wasnt that nice .. she wants everything free even my scooter .. i thinks its not cs problem its people nature i thinkks.. n you world is like this with posetive minded people n negative.

<div align="right">*Respondent #28*</div>

yes freeloaders, that were misusing the free staying on the other hand, they did behave and were kind

<div align="right">*Respondent #33*</div>

There was one surfer we weren't so happy with: He was fairly inconsiderate, and it wasn't just 1-2 but several incidents (used our towels, was annoyed when told he couldn't use the washing machine at the moment, made lots of noise in the bathroom which is next to our bedroom, didn't help cleaning up the kitchen etc.). Wrote him about it after he had left. He responded weirdly. Would have left a neutral reference, but found it really hard to write, so haven't left any reference so far.

I didnt leave neg. ref. after guest broke many stuff and left cutted nails and bodyhair all round bathroom and eaten my food from fridge without question.

Respondent #22

Yes, There has been some who are clearly just so cheap, they are not looking for any kind of connection to their hosts, only free bed. I might leave really booring reference then

Respondent #10

One person felt, that in order for a full exchange to have taken place, it is necessary to conform to the rules of reciprocity during the CouchSurfing hospitality exchange in all forms. These include also leaving a reference after the hosting experience. If those requirements have not been met, a violation of trust has taken place as he puts it:

I wrote refs for people who stayed with me, but then they didn't respond by giving me a refs, so I deleted my refs. Whats the point if they won't return the thanks. Other surfers were not outright rude but I felt that they were just using my hospitality, so I didn't leave them a ref at all.

Respondent #13

Another one describes that it depends on what you make out of a situation but that caution probably saved her trouble.

I always had between neutral and positive CS experiences, but I always turned them in positive since neutral ones were not bad ones. I have to mention that I cancelled more than once when I felt that something weird with the host might happen: this is why I think a correspondence before being hosted or hosting is a key point for me.

Respondent #5

And then there were a few odd cases, as for example the following person who had three unlucky incidents in her hosting history:

i actually i had 3 "nightmares" while hosting different 3 peoples from 3 countries. 1. guy from England invite some people while im working at the office, food and drink inside the fridge and also food inside the storage EMPTY. House really stinky and dirty. 2. girl from German, bring her own poop to my house, i gave options leave my house then find another CS host who understand her lifestyle or throw away your "thing" and come to my house clean. 3. Russian girl who can't speak english decide to

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naked (nudist) inside my house without permission first. At that time also 3 of my friends all guys are also inside of my house.

<div align="right">Respondent #16</div>

Of the cases mentioned above, 20 of the respondents remarked that they have not left a reference for the surfer after their negative experience. Considering the answers of section 4.2 of how the participants rate the reference system this may seem surprising. Initially, the majority of the respondents had answered that they always leave a reference and/or value it highly to leave an honest one, but as 60% of the hosts did not leave a reference this causes a discrepancy.

In three of the cases, respondents stated that they had left a positive reference for the surfer but mentioned the negative experience, and in two cases they left a positive one but did not mention their bad experience. Only two people actually left a neutral reference, whereas one emphasized that he mentioned the negative experience. The negative reference left by respondent #19 had been removed by the CS administrators after the case was reported and the other user removed from the community.

One member who initially had given someone a negative reference afterwards changed it as he describes below:

Yes, once because we talked it out. One time I changed it after talking it over into a neutral ref. Also one time smeone shared a far too personal story about his ex-wife's childhood that made me uncomfortable. I never mentioned it in the reference. Stuff like that...it happens both ways I guess, although I never got a negative reference.

<div align="right">Respondent #25</div>

4.4.2 Negative experiences as surfer

Similar to the previous question, the CouchSurfing members were asked of whether they have had any bad experience while surfing someone's couch. Twenty-two replied that they never had any bad experiences while staying at someone else's place. As one person wrote:

I never had a bad experience surfing. I think this is partly because I browse profiles very thoroughly.

<div align="right">*Respondent #7*</div>

This may lead to the assumption that as a surfer one has more freedom of choice of who to stay with and hence to minimize risk. However, three of the respondent stated that they had a negative experience but did not specify it further, while the remaining answers can be put down to different personalities or that the host had a dirty, messy place. Two persons described incidents in more detail but neither saw it worthwhile or justified to leave an actual negative reference for the other party. One person reported that he was inconvenienced as circumstances of his host had changed when he arrived:

Once. I asked a girl to host me in her place since she seemed to have a big couch, it turned out she had some problems with her apartment mates and I had to sleep on a random mattress without linen in her room. On the top of this, since we agreed to meet at the CS meeting of her town, I asked her if she wanted a beer (I thought it was a nice thing to do once you get hosted) and she made me pay for her boyfriend's beer and her ones (in Sweden beers and alcohol are pretty expensive)... I found this very unpolite but I did not mantion all this in the reference given.

<div align="right">Respondent #5</div>

A female member mentions the problem of getting hit on by her hosts:

Yes. There was one time when I almost left a negative reference for my host because I thought he hit on me inappropriately (concocted a plan to sleep with me) but I felt like I should have been more direct with how uncomfortable he made me feel at the time and straight to his face. Because we did communicate a bit after I left, but I didn't mention anything. Just seemed a bit unfair on my part to give him a negative reference without me having talked to him first. A second time my host told me he was in love with me and I thought it was over the top and a little selfish the way he bombarded me with all of this baseless emotion. But because he seems like a nice genuine guy other than that, I felt like he didn't deserve a negative reference.

<div align="right">Respondent #2</div>

When it came to leaving a reference for the previously described encounters, Respondent #2 writes:

In the first case I didn't leave a reference (because I don't want to write a fake reference) and the second time I left a positive reference but did not mention the negative experience.

<div align="right">Respondent #2</div>

<div align="center">59</div>

Only in two of the cases an actual negative reference was left. Unfortunately there were no further specifications of it. In four of the former incidents the surfers gave their hosts a positive reference and did not mention the negative experience. Only one person actually left a neutral one.

4.4.3 Considerations in leaving a negative reference

As the previous two sections showed, in most of the cases people preferred not to leave a reference at all and the few cases where one was left, the reference was mainly positive. Reasons may vary as from "not worth the trouble" as stated by some respondents to more serious concerns of actually causing trouble and a fear of retaliation. Also not leaving a reference at all might be considered as a form of "punishment" as it seems not to fulfil the reciprocal exchange of host and surfer.

One of the respondents mentioned his awareness of the reputational damage a negative reference can have to another person's profile. In the following he describes his considerations when asked if he had a bad experience:

> Yes, but some times wasn't so bad to leave a negative reference and destroy the profile of that person, I'll only left a negative reference in case of some criminal or very bad issue, otherwise, things like arrive later or doesn't show up I can evaluate later with the person what happened than see if deserve or not a negative reference, the problem is when you leave a negative one, be ready to get a negative one too, so sometimes is better say nothing and let it go.

> Respondent #17

29 of the respondents never wrote a negative reference while one person mentioned regrets that he maybe should have had written one. Out of the remaining five, two people left negative references for surfers that did not show up while the others did not specify their reasons. It does not seem any more common or easier to leave a neutral reference. Also 30 of the answers stated that they had never left a neutral reference. One person changed her original negative reference into a neutral one. Two people stated that it was because of a mixed experience and multiple understandings that they felt a neutral reference is actually appropriate, and one person simply commended that is was a neutral experience where the other person was nice but they didn't connect and she did not get anything "memorable or positive" out of the encounter.

4.4.4 Dealing with negative experiences

The following section looks at how the CS members in question deal with negative experiences in terms of talking to others about it either in person or online, if they happen to do so at all.

To the question if members discuss their negative experience online with the CouchSurfing community in form of group discussions or seek advice in any of the forums, more than half declined. 21 said that they do not use this option. One person stated as his reason:

> no, I think this "community" just wants to hear all the positive stuff about people!

<div align="right">Respondent #13</div>

This remark may sound harsh, on the other hand it can be directed to the overwhelming amount of positive feedback that can be found on CouchSurfing and the apparent negligence of CS members to describe their negative experiences and to report them as discussed in the previous chapter.

In the more severe case of the member who suffered by his surfer's online abuse after their encounter, the discussion forum helped to resolve his problem although he did not seek advice there in the first place.

> No , but the mentioned surfer did leave several negative and irregular remarks which were discovered and rejected by other members before I saw them. Discussion forum system worked perfectly well and even before I saw negative remarks viciously left for me the poster was exposed and dismissed as disturbed and undesirable by community. Democratic system worked perfectly well. Board considered the community discussion, my defense, public records of the disturbed poster and dismissed the poster from the site. Well done.

<div align="right">Respondent #19</div>

In the above case the group forums served as safety mechanism that enabled the case to be solved. 13 of the respondents replied that they seek or have been seeking advice in the group forums of CouchSurfing in the past. One person mentioned that he is using the discussion groups as an extra safety function in case he gets contacted by people with negative references.

Yes, I have...because some of the people who have sent me a CS request have had negative experiences from other people. I want to find out as much as possible.

Respondent #24

As a further reasons for looking for advice from others, either in person or online he states:

Yes...because sometimes the wisdom of others has helped me make a better decision.

Respondent #24

11 of the respondents prefer to discuss their problems in person, if they should have any, either with friends or fellow CouchSurfing members. The cases can vary as these two opinions show:

I asked their opinion about how to react to a ridicolous "neutral"negative reference.

Respondent #30

Asked friends who also use couchsurfing about it. They said to not leave any reference if I find it too hard to write something.

Respondent #3

I have done so but in person to a host that I had a positive experience and remain friends with.

Respondent #2

The majority of the answers, 25 in total, stated that they did not discuss or ask advice for personal CS matters from others in person. And two of the respondents remarked that rather than asking advice from others they preferred to talk it out with the person they had the problem with.

Again, no, but I talked it out with my host.

Respondent #20

Ultimately the question remained of whether something had changed for the respondents and their CouchSurfing user habits, as a result from a negative experience in the past.

Eight people stated that they continue as before, while one person relates his experience to bad luck and circumstances. But he also voices concern about how reliable the reference system actually is:

> I do continue as I did before. I mean, what happened to me was a matter of a person who, may be, was not in her best time. I think it could have happened to anybody. I am concerning about how easy people get vouched for. Once I used to be very keen in checking the vouching people, but I saw people who just join the community having vouched and they did not even have a single couchsurfing experience so... I do not know what's the meaning of vouching now!
>
> Respondent #5

Just as references seem to be given or not given too lightly, this also may apply for other safety features on the CS homepage. As can be concluded from the answers of the reference giving habits of the respondents, friends like to rate friends. Similar can be assumed for the friends and vouching features.

The overwhelming majority of the answers state that the experience of the past most certainly has made the individuals more cautious of who they invite into their home and who they might be staying with. As the following member explains:

> I still continue, but I am very cautious right now. I would for example not host any single men from some countries, from where I've received sexual spam messages or requests with such content. I am also more aware of the personality described in the profile and the other references.
>
> Respondent #1

Also the problem of freeloaders was mentioned again, as people who only take and do not give anything in return (in social terms speaking) cause a violation of the reciprocal exchange that is implied in the hospitality exchange.

> Yes. Makes me to be more cautious of people in future especially on this site. Makes me be more cautious of whether they are just purely using the site as a free place to sleep than genuinely meeting people to get to know than just using people as a free bed!
>
> Respondent #13

> Yes, especially my first surfing experience. However, the joy far outways the minor misunderstandings I described. Really, the more negative experiences had to do with personal matters getting mixed up with travelling for some reason beyond my understanding. Anyway, every experience is one to think about and every experience with everything should make everyone reconsider the position on everything.
>
> Respondent #25

Also the following person will pay closer detail of profile information and references:

> Well... The point is I was already rather cautious. But after hosting these girls I pay much mmore attention to the profile. Because according to what people say about themselves you can have an idea about the fact that you can be a "match" or not!
>
> Respondent #9

If non-CS members are involved in the hospitality encounter even more care is needed. For one member the doubts raised by her partner resulted in a stop of hosting people.

> My partner has become much more suspicious and to host it must be an agreed situation. The neutral last surfer (2nd experience) has made him much more cautious hence we have not hosted since.
>
> Respondent #26

Another member also decided to stop to host/surf but for a different reason. As she describes it:

> Yes. I decided to stop my participation as host and surfer after having got a negative reference that contains a lie and being very frustrated at the fact that CS cannot do anything about it.
>
> Respondent #11

Unfortunately the nature of the reference was not explained in the above case.

Concluding it can be said that the majority of the respondents have been made more cautious by their previous experiences and only two members actually have been put of active participation, both for their own reasons. In general, the opinion was shared that it is important when meeting another person to try to match the interests as good as possible and not to get put off by a single bad experience.

4.4.5 What if it is you?

As a negative reference can not only happen to others but also to you as well, one of the final questions was whether any of the respondents had been confronted with receiving a negative reference. In fact, five remarked that they have a negative reference on their profile. Three people used to have a negative one. In the case of Respondent #19 and the known abuser, the reference was removed „because there was overwhelming evidence that [she] was abusing the community and the site." The CouchSurfing organisations give the possibility that a negative reference can get removed, if the reference causes a violation of their reference guidelines and terms of use[7], or if a request for removal has been sent because of wrong statement or badmouthing (The CouchSurfing Project 2013d). In the case of respondent #19 there was sufficient prove that the reference was false and therefore got removed by the administrators. But his initial reaction upon receiving the actual negative reference he describes as follows:

> Very surprised and disturbed .. I wasn't expecting it, I noticed it weeks later. [She] acted very pleased with experience and my hosting but surprised me with her negative comments later.

<div align="right">Respondent #19</div>

Also three other members who had received a negative reference in the past stated that they were angry and one wrote:

> I was very upset, but it lasted one day.

<div align="right">Respondent # 32</div>

Unfortunately no further explanations of why they had received the reference in question had been specified.

Another person was surprised, because the reference was less directed against him but against his place in general.

> Not actually negative to me but was left a neg ref complaining about my imperfect home, dogs and distance from city.

<div align="right">Respondent #21</div>

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[7] https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/terms (accessed November 15, 2013)

Two of the respondents stated that they received a retaliatory reference after leaving a negative reference for someone else. One remarked:

I was distressed when the guy left me negative , afterwards changed into neutral. He had no reason to do so, exept for the revenge on my negative/neutral.

<div align="right">Respondent #8</div>

Another member ultimately lost trust in the reliability of the CS network and its "safety" functions:

Yes, I got my negative reference by giving someone one. My considerations were - copying directly from my profile: "I used to host and surf and think the reference system was reliable, until someone wrote me a reference that contains a lie about me that I cannot and will not take. I do not accept dishonesty towards or about myself, and I think this kind of behavior should not be tolerated by the community, as it affects the whole system of trust CouchSurfing is based on and depends on. I contacted the CouchSurfing website administrators about the problem and they say they cannot do anything about it because the reference does not go against "the guidelines". This means there are no guidelines against lies, and people can lie about each other in their references without having to think twice. That killed it for me. Lying to and about other people is a very serious thing and I do not want to be part of a project that easily tolerates it. I used to take this community seriously and I do not want to go through this kind of thing again, so I am hosting one last surfer in late February, because I already invited him, and then I will end my participation as host and surfer."

<div align="right">Respondent #11</div>

4.5 Discussion of findings

This section will discuss the outcome of the research results and compare it to the literature review of Chapter 2. As mentioned in Chapter 3: Methodology, also observational findings will be taken into the discussion as they show behaviour and interactions of members as they occur in discussion forums of CouchSurfing groups.

The following quotes are primarily taken from the groups Couchsurfing – Advice for Hosts, a group with 3113 members, and Couchsurfing – Advice for Surfers with 1278 members[8] as these two groups seem to be the most relevant, giving room for discussion about issues closely related to this research. Another group that will be mentioned is titled Funny Negative References with 14285 members, which is a collection of funny negative references found by members upon browsing other user's profiles.

During the analysis part several repeating key themes emerged. First they will be presented in brief below and then discussed in detail in the following chapters.

Key themes that emerged:

1. Discrepancy between rating attitudes and rating expectations
   - CS members tend to leave no reference after a "difficult" encounter with another member
   - Reference giving is influenced by reputational concerns
2. Not all negative references are the same. They can differ greatly in their meaning and importance.
   - Ratio of negative versus positive references is decisive
   - Host/surfer relation - differences in who is giving a negative reference to whom
3. A negative experience is predominantly a private matter

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[8] https://www.couchsurfing.org/groups (accessed January 18, 2014)

4.5.1 CouchSurfing experiences and rating behaviour

Initially the majority of respondents of the questionnaire asserted that receiving positive references is important to them and that they highly value the reference system. Equally important they rated the matter of leaving a reference to others. However, the process of leaving a reference for someone, even with an initial good attitude towards supporting the reference system as trust and safety building function, is influenced by several factors.

Firstly, it is always easier to write something about another person if the experience is more extreme. As discussed in Chapter 2.4, this is confirmed by Dellarocas et al. (2008) who state that traders are more willing to report really positive or really negative transactions. As mentioned by several respondents, an overly positive experience animates to write because other "people might want to meet [that person] as well" (Respondent #9). On the other hand, overly negative experiences make it easier to write about as they are seen as a warning for the community. As respondent #32 stated: "if the experience was negative or neutral and other hosts should be informed then [I write] immediately".

As most negative experiences, as mentioned by the respondents, seem to belong to a category of "average bad experience" the importance of leaving a negative reference is partly dismissed. This is for two reasons: first, as described by Resnick et al. (2000), if the transaction was unsatisfactory it is seen as not being worth the trouble or, as the experience was "not harmful" no need derives to leave a reference. This is also confirmed by Dellarocas et al. (2008) who similarly state that dissatisfied traders rather tend to remain silent if the exchange that took place had no severe negative outcome.

One member in the discussion forum Couchsufing – Advice for Hosts describes his reasons for not leaving a reference and the difficulty it has caused him in the past as follows:

> I also generally don't leave references for surfers where my experience was neutral or slightly negative. Times when there wasn't anything so objectively bad about them that the whole community needs warning, but we just didn't get on, or I didn't find them very interesting or pleasant to host.
>
> I do feel not leaving a reference might seem slightly mean of me, with guests who just sucked a little bit, but probably weren't even aware I wasn't so happy hosting them. But in the past I've fallen into the trap of leaving false-positive references trying to think of bland superlatives for surfers I didn't much like. Now I'd rather say nothing.

(CS England, July 2012)

The previous comment not only relates to the difficulty of what to do after a mediocre experience with another member, but it rightly raises the question of how to evaluate this experience in a reference and therefore the quality of references that derive from such experiences.

As part of the questionnaire the respondents were asked what kind of references they usually leave. Twenty replied that they tend to leave personalized references, where they relate it to experiences they had together and that are more descriptive. Nine people on the other hand prefer to write more general references along the lines of: "he was a nice guy and we had fun". As one member describes it, which correspond to above comment by CS England, if a reference is left after a neutral or negative encounter it often amounts to a collection of boring and dull general expressions to describe the person. Five members tend to leave both kinds of references, depending on the person they have met. One person describes it as follows: "partly general, partly personal. I want it to be useful for other surfers/hosts, but I also want to include a personal thank you note" (Respondent #33).

How different references can sound is also mentioned by the following group member who criticises that references are often given too lightly and for the wrong reasons. Also the mere number does not say anything at all unless you read the references closely. This does not only apply for negative references but mostly positive references as well.

but of course! :-) what can just mere numbers tell at all? except for maybe some extreme cases when there are more than a couple of negatives. same applies to any references, I guess. I often come across profiles with 1-2 hundreds (!) of references, where not more than a couple dozens pertain to hospitality exchange. further, when reading into these references you may see that 90% of them are like "fun fun fun wow we partied together so cool". hm.

(CS Russia, January 2012)

Beside the question of the quality of the reference after a negative experience, and the considerations of whether one should leave a reference or not altogether, one of the main concerns is the reputational damage this might cause. Concerns in leaving a negative or even neutral reference directly relate to reputational concerns, being it one's own, or in some cases even for the other person. Fears exist that leaving a negative reference may result in a retaliatory negative one. Or as Respondent #17 described it, it "wasn't so bad to leave a negative reference and destroy the profile of that person." Moreover he continues that he fears

retaliatory action because "when you leave a negative one, be ready to get a negative one too" (Respondent #17).

Fear of retaliatory action is one of the concerns that guide CS members rating habits. It takes time to establish a CS profile with positive ties, hence rating decisions are guided by fear as the following member suggests in a discussion group related to negative feedback. She clearly states that the references are highly determined by reciprocity and a "you get what you give pattern":

> Fear of giving a negative reference, because chances are extremely high that you will get one back. Look around, hosts that give negative references have negative references. Hosts that write glowing, nice references have glowing, nice references. Almost like Magic???
>
> (CS Nicaragua, April 2012)

Above comment corresponds to the negative aspects of reciprocity as described by Dellarocas et al. (2004) and as discussed in Chapter 2.2.2, stating that friendly or hostile actions are rewarded by corresponding actions. In this case it can be directly related to references where its behavioural patterns relate to one where positive or negative references are answered with similar actions.

Unless a case was severe, a rather neutral/negative encounter can therefore take the following turns. Either it turns into a silent transaction that fails to contribute to trust building, or it turns into a case of reciprocity where one party deliberately waits for the other to write first in order to reciprocate the reference. However, if no one writes first then it also leads to a silent transaction. As respondent #7 writes: "If I had an alright-encounter I sometimes wait what the other person has to say, before replying rather neutral."

Another outcome can be that a positive reference is left in order to elicit a positive one in return and/or to avoid any kind of inconvenience with the other party. Simultaneously the rules of reciprocity and hospitality are met, regardless of the actual quality of the experience, but at the same time this does not contribute to the reference system as safety function. As stated by a CS member, it is easy to fall into a trap of leaving superficial positive references for surfers you did not like much.

As a second point, references are seen as a form of "reward". As discussed in Chapter 2.2, the hospitality exchange is subject to reciprocity in terms of a symbolic exchange (Pelapret and Brown 2010) and that exchange necessitates some sort of return. Despite the

fact that hospitality should be seen as its own reward within the hospitality context, it is important that although there is an exchange of ambiguous values, it is necessary that the requirements of reciprocity are met (Molz 2007). If this exchange did not take place in form of a satisfactory interaction during the face-to-face encounter, especially for the person in the role of the host, then at least a positive reference will hopefully be the "thank you" for the encounter. As Rosen et al. write, "when members host they have much to gain but also much to lose, such as personal belongings, personal space, etc" (Rosen et al. 2011, 4).

Therefore, not leaving a reference because the expectations were not met is used as form of a punishment towards the other member, as this will not contribute in his or her status and reputation building and the creation of ties. For another reason, the intention of not leaving a reverence for a CS novice can as well be influence by motives of "punishment". As one member mentioned: "I didnt leave him a reference, CS might just not be for him" (Respondent #33). However, this also contributes to the problem that discontent stays invisible and it fails to generate trust as mentioned by Tran (2009) because the history of transactions will be the trust and safety generating factor.

Leaving a reference is also used for educational matters. As several of the respondents stated, it makes a difference for them of whether the person they hosted/surfed with has few or no references at all. In those cases it is more likely for the party with more references, therefore experience, to leave an immediate reference for the other one as "it is going to count" (Respondent #9). In this case one person helps to overcome the other one's *cold-start* problem as discussed in Chapter 2.3 and referred to by Swamynathan et al. (2010). But it can also be for educational matters because "perhaps they don't understand the system (or it's like an unwritten rule to me) – i hosted you – so in return leave a reference for me" (Respondent #27). In this case, the social capital of the person who suffered from cold-start problem is increased and it can help him or her in further interactions.

A further point for not leaving a reference can also be insecurity about the situation and a question of personal perception. As one respondent simply stated, "No I haven't but maybe I should" (Respondent #33), while another respondent voices her regrets of not leaving a reference: "I didnt leave a negative reference because I wasnt sure, but then I heard afterwards that he had been hitting on girls before but he did not have any negative references on his profile….." (Respondent #12). In both cases the respondents had between 1 to 5

experiences either as host or surfer and been a member for less than 6 months. It is clear that trust and confidence into the community increase as people host more. Therefore it could be assumed that newer members are more likely not to leave a reference due to reason to insecurity and a higher vulnerability as of their status as "newbie". Reciprocal action would hit them harder than an already firmly established community member.

Last but not least, as also directly connected to the point of "reference as reward", there is an expected reciprocity in ratings as already mentioned above. Although direct reciprocity in terms of a hosting exchange as discussed in Chapter 2.2.1 is not a mandatory action, it nevertheless seems that CouchSurfing users ascribe the direct reciprocity to the rating system. Not only do positive references animate a positive response, while negative ones animate the other party to write negative references. This also becomes apparent in comments as: "I wait for my CS to leave [me] a reference, as it's really "their turn" to do this first" (Respondent #27). In this case direct reciprocity is expected although the values of what has been exchanged are ambiguous.

As another respondent describes it, he classified it as negative and ungrateful behaviour that his guests did not leave a reference although he had left them one. "I wrote [references] for people who stayed with me, but then they didn't respond by giving me a [reference], so I deleted my [reference]" (Respondent #13). The removal of the reference by the respondent takes on once more the form of punishment, as the transaction was not fulfilled there shall be no reward either.

All of above mentioned categories and behavioural patterns are directly or indirectly influenced by reputational concerns. Either respondents fear retaliatory action, do not want to reward someone and consequently help to build someone else's status and reputation, or are dissatisfied if another party fails to reward them by contributing to their own reputational history. Furthermore, the participants rating habits in relation to negative experiences can be classified according to the three categories of raters as defined by Dellarocas et al. (2004) and as mentioned in Chapter 2.4. They are as follows:

Altruist, who want to share their overly positive or negative experience and accordingly support the community and its trust and safety features. The *self-interested trader* who wants to get his reward for the experience in one way or another, either in a positive exchange or in form of a reference. If neither of the criteria are fulfilled he/she won't act, therefore not leave a reference. A bad exchange does not deserve a reference. And the last

one, who falls into the category of the *reciprocator*, the members who wait for the other person's reference before they act accordingly. This can result in retaliatory action, if a negative reference is received. Simultaneously, the category of the reciprocator is closely connected to that of the self-interested rater, because the rater wants to receive his reward for the encounter.

Through this pattern of ratings, a biased reference base derives as numerous silent transactions are accumulated which in return gives the positive reference base the chance to grow. Furthermore, cases that actually would need reporting go undetected. This is a known problem. Below a member of the group Couchsurfing - Advice for Hosts, raises his concerns that people are too afraid or insecure of reputational consequences than to leave an honest reference or a reference at all:

> A US girl had a negative experience with a CSer in Delhi, but, she just wrote a neutral reference, maybe she was afraid of a counter-attack which certainly comes when you write a negative reference for someone.
>
> What do you suggest one must do when one had a negative experience with someone, is writing a neutral reference better??
>
> But, if you write a neutral reference, I don't think that you're doing any good for the CS community, by hiding that person's misdeeds, as others won't get to know what kinda person he/she is, and will fall in his trap, and he will be happy that his wrong-doings are not affecting him in anyway, and he can go scot-free.
>
> There are several Indian Hosts I know of, and many whom I don't even know have been manipulating their surfers by not even letting them meet/contact/be in touch with other CSers, and not even letting them go anywhere outside home. What surfers are gaining by that, nothing, and the hosts are never exposed because surfers don't write the real picture of what they faced/experienced.
>
> (CS India, December 2011)

In cases as described above, a silent transaction can cause a serious threat to safety. As seen by the respondents' initial responses of how they rate the reference system and compared to their actual actions, this causes as discrepancy. On the one hand participants complain that references seemed to be biased and with little meaning, on the other hand they help to contribute to exactly this fact which causes a dilemma. As it is the members' responsibility to create a safe community they simultaneously fail of not doing so. As trust is developed by information exchange, it also supports the coherence of the community.

4.5.2 Negative references in their context

References can convey difference messages and the kind of references a person has can also give clues about his participation habits in the CS community. Figure 6 below shows that the current reference statistics displayed at the top of the reference list of each individuals profile, make it easy to get an overview for another party of how many references have been received by hosts, surfers, travellers, and how many of those are positive, neutral or negative.

Figure 6: Reference overview of CouchSurfing profile

As the above figure shows, some people predominantly like to host as they do not have the opportunity or means to travel. As a CS member from Ireland (who the reference statistics of Figure 6 belong to) stated "I like to host people as I cannot travel at the moment. It is like going on holiday at home because you have all those people from different countries coming and they share their culture and stories."

It is seen more critical if a member predominantly surfs without hosting others. As one member suggests in a recent discussion group on How to kick out freeloaders:

> Its very difficult best to prevent freeloaders from coming to stay..If you see they are
> mostly surfing then they could be a freeloader.

> (CS England, September 2013)

However, it should not be judged too lightly only by the statistic, as some members might simply not have the means to host others. In order to contribute to the hospitality exchange in means that suggest an exchange of social goods, the following member explains how a surfer can give as well:

It is a bit erroneous that people think the host gives, the surfer takes. Of course there are many new and old members who only surf to take and that is the reason why hosts are so apprehensive towards surfing only types. Apart from stowaway or coffee, you may offer your host some good stories, help in the household esp cleaning(since surfers tend to offer cooking) and tidying, repairs, other types of help, presents from countries you visit, sharing skills that you may have etc....etc.....

(CS Germany, November 2013)

Furthermore, Figure 6 also shows how clear an overview of references is given and by clicking on a number all the references of the same category are displayed. This makes it easy for viewers to get immediately to the negative feedback in case it exists. Negative references can differ greatly in their meaning and importance and a negative reference means not necessarily a negative impact on the member's reputation and status. Before delving more into the impact a negative reference may or may not have for a CS member, there is one form of negative reference that has not been mentioned yet: negative references which are actually stating an overly positive experience but are labelled as negative to call extra attention to them. The writers are aware that third parties are more curious to read negative experiences than to go through a list of positive references.

Beside these obviously "positive-negative" references and how diverse negative references can be, shows especially the CouchSurfing group Funny Negative References. Members post funny sounding negative references that they have stumbled upon while browsing other members' profiles. They copy and paste the negative reference and its (usually negative) response, but keep the original posters anonymous. The posts mirror a mix of hateful and upset references about dirty socks, lateness and clash of personalities, to accusation of unwanted sexual advances and other innuendoes. Whether the references arose from serious situations or are the result of misunderstanding and miscommunication is impossible to say. But the vast majority of examples, which have been posted by members, have in common that both parties gave each other negative references.

From the giving and receiving of negative references the question arises whether having a negative reference really decrease your chances of being hosted or to find people to host? As a CS member describes it in a forum discussion with a similar title in the group Couchsurfing – Advice for Surfers, it is the context the negative reference is seen that counts.

> As a host I certainly read references. It matters if there's 1 negative between let's say less than 10 references or, like in Tristan's situation, between over a hundred. If a surfer has one or two negatives, I read them to see what it's about and it's not instantly a no-no to host them. If there are more that all indicate the same type of not-so-nice behaviour, then it will count for me.

<div align="right">(CS Netherlands, January 2012)</div>

Above comment correspond to the opinions on the same topic shared by the majority of respondents. Number one way to deal with a negative reference, as mentioned by the respondents, is to apply close reading strategies and compare the negative reference to the total amount of references. These strategies may help to increase safety but still, they are no 100 percent security. Mentioned among the three frequently occurring problems in online feedback by Resnick et al. (2000), one of the most difficult issues is that of ensuring honesty as discussed in Chapter 2.4. Some negative references give off the impression that they have been given too lightly, while others, more severe cases, are possibly not reported at all. This can be related to positive references that are written to obtain positive feedback in return or simply to avoid negative feedback which also relates to the discrepancy that can be seen between rating attitudes and rating expectations of CS members. As answered by the respondents, the majority did not leave a reference at all and the few that did tended to leave a positive one despite the negative experience. Only three times the negative experience was mentioned in the positive reference but more than often it was omitted.

The issue of ensuring honesty and the relevance of references is also criticised by the following group member in Advice for Hosts. He mentions that the fact of inaccurate references especially causes a risk for new CouchSurfing members who rely on the initial trust of the system.

> We were actually just discussing that in the previous thread, "I feel I would never want to surf again". Undeserved references appear to be left more than those which are deserved - it is a bit of a free-for-all.

> It is important that newer surfers are cautious when assessing references because this is entirely too common and hardly something that is going to change any time soon. At the moment, it is best to simply be aware.

<div align="right">(CS Japan, December 2011)</div>

CouchSurfing members are concerned about reputational consequences upon leaving a negative reference, the following member suggests a more reasonable and objective approach, which can be considered both, educational and profitable for the community:

Finally, if you have a problem like this with a guest, it helps to write a reference. It doesn't have to look like an evil act of revenge, and it doesn't have to be impolite. You can keep it neutral if you want; it could even be positive, if the rest of your experience was nice. The content matters more than the label.

Instead of complaining that they ignored the host, one could express that it was a pity one didn't have a chance to interact as they seemed preoccupied with something. People can read between the lines, or if they can't: here's a good chance to learn it. The point of such a reference is not to make trouble for them, but to help them find people in future who wouldn't mind so much, and are a better match, and to avoid disappointment for everybody.

(CS Germany, September 2013)

Beside that fact that the content of the negative reference is important, a further factor that decides whether the negative reference causes reputational harm to the person's profile and status as a CS member is the ratio of negative versus positive references and the total number of references.

A negative reference, if not serious, can easily balance itself out by a high amount of positive references. With more than one bad reference the amount of positive ones has to increase accordingly to balance it out. The following group member in Advice for Hosts mentions several of the points made previously in his comment. He advices that references fulfil a safety function, calls awareness for retaliatory action and mentions that in case the person in question receives a negative reference this might influence his reputation, because the ratio of negative versus positive references matters.

So sorry that a host did that to you. Not once but TWICE! Ouch! A couple people have already given you good advice I would just add a couple of things. Number 1: A negative reference is not supposed to be used as a tool for revenge but as a warning. So if you feel the CS community needs to be warned about these peoples' actions then you should act accordingly. 2. Just remember that they can always write you a negative reference back and given that you only have 16 references that might impact you more when it comes to getting a couch, especially in destination cities where-- lets face it--it's a hosts' market. I don't say that to scare you out of writing them a negative reference.

(CS Mexico, June 2012)

It is not only seen as a problem if a member received negative references, but it also matters when a person is leaving negative references to others. If happened in more than one case, regardless whether the person received a negative one in return, then he might be seen as picky or a difficult person to get along with. In this case a CouchSurfing member who is trying to be honest in detailing the experiences he had, by leaving negative references to

others, he might do himself and his reputation more harm than good. This is causing an apparent paradox for CS members.

Last but not least, as became apparent by answers of the respondents in Chapter 4.4, they seem to be more willing to take the risk of a surfer with a negative reference, when they are in the role of the host, as it seems natural to be on safer ground when at home. In the role of the surfer, the negative reference on a potential host's profile weights heavier as requires a far bigger leap of trust, as one is leaving the safety of one's home.

Concluding it can be said that the negative references on profiles cause various problems and are influenced by issues such as extreme encounters, a reference as reward or punishment, references for educational matters, and a general influence by reciprocity in form of a social good. A negative reference is not necessarily a negative reference and the number of references a profile has is just as decisive as the seriousness of the reference. Furthermore, these actions are influence by arbitrary behaviour of participants causing a discrepancy between initial intentions and rating behaviour. The problem of not reporting difficult encounters increases the growth of a biased reference system, whereas the writing of "false" references contributes to the unreliability of the reference system as safety function. But this again is dealt with by CS members by applying close reading strategies and the fact of being aware of the flaws and problems of the system. In terms of negative references on a profile it thus can be said as the following group member puts it:

> That being said a negative reference isn't the CS death sentence that many people fear. Most potential hosts are intelligent enough to know that sometimes two people just don't get along and there's nothing inherently 'bad' about either party.
>
> (CS Mexico, 18 July 2011)

4.5.3 Discussion forums and asking for advice

Online discussion forums are the most visible form of information sharing and also spaces of encounter. Reasons for participation in online forums have been discussed in Chapter 2, and as identified by Pelapret and Brown (2010) the forms of discussion can take on communitarian, cooperative, pluralistic, democratic, reflective, to competitive features, and they can all be mixed in the same group.

Furthermore, as suggested by Hersberger et al. (2005) and discussed in Chapter 2.3, taking part in discussion groups can help to integrate oneself in the community and through interaction with others help to increase one's social status and sense of belonging. The respondents of the study not only use CouchSurfing.org for hosting and surfing reasons, but 26 stated that they use them for additional purposes such as finding travel information, meeting and communicating with other members and to join other activities organized by CS members (see also Chapter 4.1). 18 of the respondents answered that they regularly participate in group discussions and at least all participants are members of CS groups and visit them, otherwise they would not have come across this questionnaire.

While the majority of the respondents stated to be active participants in online forums, one topic they are less inclined to discuss publicly is personal negative CS experiences as their answers show in chapter 4.4.4. 36 % of the respondents have been seeking advice in CS forums regarding personal negative experience in the past, while 11 replied that they prefer to talk about problems in person, either with friends or fellow CS members.

Nevertheless, CouchSurfing's hosting/surfing related groups are full of discussions about topics such as expectations for host/ surfers, how to deal with freeloaders, when to leave a reference, what to do if you do not connect with the surfer/host, etc. These seem to be topics relevant to a larger consensus. In group discussions participants not only attempt to increase credibility, but also define a common idea of do's and don'ts. "The CS community may give its members the feeling that they have a social support network and friends in otherwise unknown locations" (Rosen et al. 2011, 4). Several comments found in those discussion boards have been taken into the discussion part in the previous chapters in order to support the answers of the respondents of the questionnaire.

The outcome of the questionnaire showed no correlation between length of membership and/or hosting/surfing experience and the participation in online discussions or willingness in asking others for advice. On the other hand, for example in the discussion

forum of Couchsurfing – Advice for host, a core group of a hand full of members can be identified that lead the majority of the discussions. This is a group that consists of long term members with firmly established reputations and a long list of references on their profiles. It can be assumed, that part of their strong involvement in the discussion group derives from the amount of time they have invested into the community as can be seen by their profile ties and historical record.

Chapter 2.2 discussed that time, in form of length of membership and participation in the community, is a factor that plays a role in information sharing and whether a person becomes an active participant. Similar categories for participants in group discussions apply as they do for online raters. They are furthermore influenced by a sense of belonging and a sense of status when helping others (Lampel and Bhalla 2007). Also the promotion of certain goods, in this case the symbolic good in form of education, can be named as a factor in group discussions. Beside the fact that the group forums present a ground for shared interests, the group forums can also work as extra safety function if members decide to make use of them. They can assist new members in finding their way around the community. Also as shown in the example of respondent #19 they can fulfil an option as surveillance mechanism.

Concluding it can be said that whether advice is looked for in discussion groups depends on the personal preference of each member as there have been no clear results in the outcome of the questionnaire. However, it seems it is more likely for members with already established reputation and ties to seek advice and participate in group discussions than for new members. As discussed in Chapter 2.2, first it is necessary for new members to accumulate to the rules of the community, and the more time has been invested into the community, the higher the affiliation as a member with it and the more confident before they start to participate in group discussions (Wang and Fesenmaier 2004). This is also confirmed by Dellarocas et al. (2004) who found a positive correlation between the time of membership and the involvement in the community. Respectively, when browsing through profiles of active group members in the groups Couchsurfing – Advice for Hosts the member profiles showed at least 20+ references and in Couchsurfing – Advice for Surfers at least 5+ references. (As well as Negative Funny References - 5+ references.)

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This study aimed to look at how negative experiences are dealt with in an online hospitality network. For this, CouchSurfing.org was chosen as a case study, as it is the largest online hospitality network up to date, creating a hybrid between online-offline communities. The CouchSurfing Project strives to portray a positive community image, promoting trust and cultural exchange. But there are risks in this kind of interaction among strangers which cannot be eliminated despite the best trust and safety generating measures. Therefore the focus was put on the negative aspects that can result from a CouchSurfing offline experience and how this influences online interaction. The aim was to look at how negative experiences as host and surfer, influenced decision-making in regards of reference giving, if there were any patterns that could be identified, and how a negative experience determined member behaviour in terms of further participation. Also concerns regarding reputation and status played a vital role as they were one of the most frequently referred to concerns by CouchSurfing members.

A literature review was concluded to identify already existing studies in terms of CouchSurfing and to give insight and background information into the topic of hospitality online networks. There is a lot of existing literature in relation to online communities, rating behaviour, and member participation in online communities. When it comes to CouchSurfing, the majority of studies have been focused on the creation of trust through technology and members' participation within the network, which is one of its most important features. There have been a number of quantitative and qualitative studies primarily analyzing the creation of trust and positive ties, but beside a quantitative study by Adamic et al. (2011), which briefly touched the issue of negative experiences, there has been no qualitative study focusing on members' actions and how negative experiences during the hospitality exchange affect their actions afterwards in the hospitality online network. As Chapter 2 concluded, a certain degree of participation is expected and needed and long-lived online profiles are beneficial. It is necessary that within the whole process of hospitality exchange, online and offline, the requirements of reciprocity are met. This contributes to the creation of trust and safety of the system. Furthermore, expected reciprocity directly influences the decision making process of the users as it can impact their status and reputation.

An online questionnaire as research method has been used to bring insight to some of the issues. In hindsight some of the answers of the respondents were lacking more detailed clarification. Unfortunately, as no contact details were given, it was impossible to get more elaborate feedback. Also it has been neglected to find out whether respondents who received a negative reference reciprocated it accordingly. For this reason, personal interviews may have proven better as research method. Nevertheless there was a great feedback in voluntary participation in the questionnaire, which could be ascribed to members' willingness and support for improving the CS system and a chance to voice their opinion. It could also be ascribed to a reciprocal exchange of social goods as part of the CouchSurfing network's mentality.

The initial research questions and results of the study will be discussed below.

5.1 Conclusions to research questions

A man ought to be a friend to his friend and repay gift with gift. People should meet smiles with smiles and lies with treachery.[9]

How do negative experiences influence decision-making in an online hospitality network?

In respect to the research question, three different aspects that are influenced by negative experiences have been looked at: negative experiences and their influence on the reference giving process, and how negative references influences hosting and surfing decisions.

Negative experiences and decision-making are complex processes that are influenced by various factors. Not only are hierarchy, status and reciprocity decisive factors but, as stated in Chapter 2, they are also tightly interconnected and are directly influencing each other. As an additional factor that influences the handling of a negative experience, is the role of the CouchSurfing member in each case and whether he has been the host or the surfer.

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[9] From The Hávamál: with Selections from other Poems in the Edda, edited by D.E. Martin Clarke, Cambridge, 1923, p. 55

Furthermore, their respectively hierarchical standing within the CS network has impact on the process as it influences personal decision-making.

In general, in terms of negative experience and reference giving, it has become clear that extreme experiences, being it overly positive or overly negative, are more likely to get reported. An average bad experience, which is nevertheless classified as negative, can involve anything, from clash of personalities and misunderstandings, to messy, dirty homes, lateness, no show, ungrateful or rude behaviour, neglect of leaving a reference, etc, just to name a few. Such a non-harmful experience tends to elicit "no need of reporting" in form of a negative reference by CouchSurfing members.

In summary, as a consequence of a negative experience, harmful or non-harmful, three consequences can derive:

1. Firstly, the negative experience is reported in form of a negative reference. As the overall ratio of positive versus negative references show, this is rather rare. Also as the answers of the respondents show, there is a tendency of not to leave a negative reference.

2. A positive reference is left regardless of the actual situation. In this case, the negative experience may or may not be mentioned in the positive reference.

    The giving of a positive reference is foremost influenced by status concerns, but also by reciprocity or expected reciprocity as implied by the CouchSurfing network. The fear of retaliatory references and avoiding getting into further conflict with another member has been named as reasons to leave a positive reference. In these cases, the decision is directly influenced by reputational concerns. This can be for one's own reputation and that one's own actions will directly get reciprocated, or concerns for the reputation of the other member.

    Furthermore, this decision-making process is also directly influenced by the host/surfer hierarchy and might apply if, for example, one of them suffers from the cold start problem. A person with a higher number of references on their profile will react differently in leaving a reference when the other person who is supposed to receive the reference has very few or no references. In these cases the tendency goes to "not leaving a reference" or "leaving a positive reference". The motivation for this is either to leave a reference as reward or for educational matters. The member ranking

higher in status may give a reference in order to encourage the other party to continue hosting/surfing and may relate the negative experience rather to the lack of experience than to wilful harm. In this case, the member who created the negative experience receives a second chance and the option to learn, especially if the other member mentions the negative aspects in his or her positive reference.

Another reason to leave a positive reference is to elicit a positive reference in return. This can be motivated again by reputational concerns or purely selfish reasons, in this case to increase one's status by receiving a positive reference. However, by leaving a positive reference after an unsatisfactory encounter with another member, one can also easily fall into a habit of writing false-positive reference that convey little meaning as has been discussed in Chapter 4. This in return has negative impact on the reliability of the reference system as safety function.

3.   The third possible outcome is that no reference is left in which case a silent transaction takes place.

A silent transaction can occur if both parties are strong reciprocators. If no one writes first, this will result in a silent transaction. As another reasons for not leaving a reference has been named that this serves as a form of, as it does not contribute to the other member's reputation and experience history, especially if the member suffers from cold-start problem. As one member voiced it after a disappointing hosting experience: "CS might just not be for him. That's why I didn't give him a reference".

Further reasons are fear of retaliation, fear of wrong own personal judgement and insecurity, hence avoiding discomfort of writing something negative or false positive and/or a fear of further reputational consequences.

All of the above points get impact by the roles the CouchSurfing members take on in each situation and are influenced by rules of reciprocity which affects the reference leaving process further. Regardless of the host/surfer hierarchy, the host may see the receiving of a reference as a reward for his hospitality. This is where the expected reciprocity of host versus surfer comes into play. The host may wait to be rewarded first in form of a positive reference. In this case it is up to the surfer to act first. If this is not the case, a violation of trust took place as several of the respondents described and it is likely to end in a silent transaction as well.

Points two and three, false positive reference and silent transaction highlight the problem of ensuring honesty and the threat to the reference system as safety function of CouchSurfing. Also leaving no reference as a "punishment" as well as the issue of leaving false positive references create a liability for the reference system as safety function as well as a paradox. It is the CS community that is criticising the flaws of the reference system, but as the answers of the respondents showed, they are contributing to the flaws of the system they criticize.

An unknown factor in all of this is the influence the CouchSurfing reference-writing-reminder may have on the process of writing references as it sends mixed messages. On the one hand the reminder is there to encourage reference giving after an offline experience, but on the other it tells you not to leave a reference if you have nothing substantial to say (see also Figure 5). Whether this influences reference writing decisions might be interesting to find out and point to further research.

Furthermore, a negative reference is not a death sentence as reputational concerns may let assume. The ratio of negative to positive references is important. For example, one bad experience among 100 positive ones, omits the negative one. The more positive experiences and references a member has the more unimportant a negative experience becomes.

Negative references can however influence hosting/surfing selection and impact the decision of a third party. As the answers of the respondents showed, members were more inclined to host someone with a negative reference when feeling safer in their own home, than taking the risk to stay with someone who has a negative reference. A further decisive factor is also whether the person with a negative reference has given or received the reference. If it is a person that has given negative references to others, the person may be seen as picky and difficult and therefore respondents were more careful in making a hosting decision as this may affect their reputation. This in some way causes a contradiction, as the majority of respondents stated that they appreciated honesty in leaving references, even if it was negative. But if the honesty can directly affect their reputation, it is less appreciated and is leading to caution. If the person received a negative reference, they were more likely to put it down to misunderstandings and cultural/personal differences if the nature of the reference was not overly severe.

The consequences drawn by members after a negative encounter beside the decisions in the reference leaving process were that they were led to become more cautious in their decisions of who to host and surf with and to pay caution to the references and the unspoken meaning they might convey. In two cases the individuals were put off hosting others altogether as they were concerned about their family and partners and did not want to put them at risk.

As a result, multiple intentions of reference giving or non- reference giving have been identified. It can be said that the behaviour of the members and their habits of leaving no or meaningless reference after a neutral/negative encounter caused a dilemma. On the one hand participants noted that references seemed to be biased and with little meaning, on the other hand they helped to contribute to exactly this fact, which caused a discrepancy. As it is the members' responsibility to create a safe community they simultaneously fail of not doing so.

Information sharing: How are negative experiences and references dealt with and discussed by members and the community?

A negative experience or what is perceived as negative is a personal matter, and so do vary the degrees of response and consequence. There are cases where negative references are given too lightly or seem exaggerated which becomes visible in the group Negative Funny References. There are serious cases, negative experiences that are not reported, for reasons of insecurity of a member or fear of retaliatory action. This especially causes a danger for other members as the negative experience is omitted. Also blind trust into the reference system by a member can cause potential risks, however, as all of the respondents stated, people with more experience know how to read between the lines. There is also a high degree of agreement that it is important to try to get a coherent picture of the situation and to evaluate both sides. Therefore the main danger lies for new members who want to rely on the reference system as trust generator and may not have a lot of experiences in reading and distinguishing "good" and "bad" references, being them positive, neutral, or negative.

Members with a higher status are more likely to participate in group discussion as they have become acquainted with the network and its rules. However, there has been no direct correlation between length of membership and discussion in online forums regarding

problems. Although a third of the respondents have been asking for advice in forums regarding a negative experience, it is mainly up to personal preferences. Asking for advice was either seen as a personal matter or only in cases that were unclear the advice of others was taken into consideration.

Beside the fact that the CouchSurfing groups present a ground for shared interests, the group forums can also work as extra safety function if members decide to make use of them. Public discussions in the groups Advice for Hosts and Advice for Surfers let assume that problematic experiences and their outcomes and consequences are frequently discussed topics.

5.2 Ideas for further research

Trust is developed by information exchange and it also supports the coherence of the community. The CouchSurfing community has been the subject of current changes. The most important one is the change of The CouchSurfing Project from a non-profit organisation to a B corporation in 2012. There have been an increased amount of features that lead it more towards a social network instead of focusing only on hospitality exchange. Beside social network tools to create and promote events and activities there is also the possibility to connect ones CouchSurfing profile with Facebook.

Further changes that have been noted since the beginning of this study in 2011: there are no more private trust ratings; no more advice for giving and considering negative reference but general reference guidelines; no more negative statistics, instead an info graphic that tells no hard facts but instead highlights the social network functions. All these changes seem to encourage an overly positive community image.

Plus there has been a fast increase of new memberships, therefore a large number of profiles without ties and experiences showed up. How this influences the already exiting user base and community could be topic for further research. In group discussion forums, members often voice concern that the original CouchSurfing spirit has been lost and that there is a difference between the old members and newer ones. What this means and how cultural values within the network are created may be an interesting topic to look into.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Questionnaire about experiences on CouchSurfing, distributed online

What is your gender?

> female
>
> male

What is your age?

> 18 to 24
>
> 25 to 34
>
> 35 to 44
>
> 45 to 54
>
> 55 to 64
>
> 65 or older

Country of origin?

How long have you been a member of CS?

> less than 6 months
>
> 6-12 months
>
> 1-3 years
>
> 4-6 years
>
> 7 years or more
>
> Other, please specify

In what way are you using CS? (multiple answers)

> I mainly surf couches.
>
> I mainly host.
>
> I about equally surf couches and host people.
>
> I participate in group discussions.
>
> I use CS groups for finding travel information.
>
> I use CS groups to meet people.
>
> I attend/ organize CS meetings/ gatherings and activities.
>
> To communicate with other members.
>
> To affiliate myself with the community.
>
> Other, please specify

How many surfers have you hosted?

> none
>
> 1-5
>
> 6-10
>
> 11-20
>
> 21-30
>
> 31-50

more than I can count

How many different couches have you surfed?

1-5

6-10

11-20

21-30

31-50

more than I can count

As how important do you rate the reference system on CS?

Leaving a reference is for you...

Reading references before responding to a request is...

The amount of references a person has is...

For me to receive positive references is....

To write an honest reference about another member is...

Very important Important Neutral Unimportant Very unimportant

How frequently do you leave references after meeting a surfer/host?

Always

Sometimes

Never

Depends. Please specify

When do you leave a reference? (multiple answers)

After surfing.

After hosting.

After meeting someone at a CS meeting/event in person.

After meeting someone online on CS.

Other, please specify

If you leave a reference do you write it first or rather wait until you receive a reference first?

As a host: Did you ever have a negative CS experience (something that would classify in your opinion as negative)?

Did you leave a reference or mentioned it in your

reference given? (Please describe briefly.)

In regard to the experience of the previous question. Have you left a

neutral reference

negative reference

positive reference but mentioned the negative experience

positive reference but did not mention negative experience

no reference

Other, please specify

As a surfer: Did you ever have a negative CS experience (something that would classify

in your opinion as negative)?

Did you not leave a reference or mentioned it in your reference given?

In regard to the experience of the previous question. Have you left a

neutral reference

negative reference

positive reference but mentioned the negative experience

positive reference but did not mention negative experience

no reference

Other, please specify

Do you discuss a negative experience publicly with the CS community, i.e. discussion forum (Advice for hosts/ surfers, etc) ?

Do you ask for advice from fellow members of what to do after a negative experience?

If you had the case and have done so, can you briefly describe it.

After a negative experience did/would you surf/host again?

Yes

No

Maybe

Other, please specify

How do you react toward seeing a negative reference on someone's profile?

Do you respond to a request if the surfer has a negative reference on his/her profile?

What are your considerations?

Would you respond to a request if the surfer has left negative references to others?

Would you send a Couch request to someone who has a negative reference on their profile?

Do you have a negative reference on your profile?

Yes

No

I had it removed.

Other, please specify

How did you react upon receiving the reference?

Did you leave a negative reference in return?

No

I contacted the person and asked him/her to remove the reference.

Yes, because...

Have your written a negative reference for anyone? If yes, what were your considerations?

Have you given a neutral reference?

No

Yes, because...

How would you describe the kind of references you leave to others?

Personal (do you relate it to experiences you had together, e.g. we biked around town before partying all night)

More general (Ex. he was a nice guy to talk and hang out with).

Other, please specify

Last but not least: If you had any negative experiences either as host/ surfer or at meetings, etc. did they put you off Couchsurfing, made you more cautious or do you continue as before?