

UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

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Women and Couchsurfing: Empowerment and the Construction  
of Hybrid Identities in a Local-Global Context

Master's Thesis

Vaasa 2013

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**Discipline:** Intercultural Studies in Communication and Administration  
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**Master's Thesis:** Women and Couchsurfing: Empowerment and the Construction of Hybrid Identities in a Local-Global Context  
**Degree:** Master of Arts  
**Date:** May 2013  
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**ABSTRACT**

*Couchsurfing* is a worldwide virtual hospitality network. Conceived and launched more than a decade ago, the network firstly attracted people with financial capacities to travel, mainly from Western and more culturally liberal countries. Today, the community has extended to include people that may never travel abroad for cultural or financial hindrances, but who still can participate in a truly global network where like-minded foreigners and also locals gather, exchange and learn from each other.

As a global web-based community of people aiming to meet in real life, Couchsurfing precipitates the intercultural encounters towards a rapid, proximate and useful experience for its members. These encounters may take place in more conservative societies where the act of hosting strangers and walking with foreigners may interfere with culturally embedded meanings, practices and limits. Especially when these encounters happen between genders.

This research explores the Couchsurfing experiences of women coming from highly gender unequal societies, where travelling and hosting strangers may have immediate and future implications. Using Skype, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the stories of these women. Using Grounded Theory, this qualitative research shows that women can use Couchsurfing as a tool to construct their hybrid identity, gain social, cultural and symbolic capital, and that Couchsurfing creates “spaces” where women can empower themselves and experience new gender dynamics.

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**KEYWORDS:** Couchsurfing, women empowerment, globalization, global and local, hybrid identity, gender in intercultural encounters



## 1 INTRODUCTION

Couchsurfing was conceived by Casey Fenton in 1999. After a trip to Iceland, the young American had the idea of a worldwide hospitality network where its members could meet when travelling, exchange interact and help each other by hosting other members of the community in their homes free of charge. Since its foundation, Couchsurfing envisions:

[...] a world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections with the people and places they encounter. Building meaningful connections across cultures enables us to respond to diversity with curiosity, appreciation and respect. The appreciation of diversity spreads tolerance and creates a global community. (<http://www.couchsurfing.org/about>)

In 2004, the first version of the Couchsurfing website was launched. Contrary to other major social networks that exist on the internet, Couchsurfing aims at helping people to meet in real life, not just virtually. Couchsurfing regroups like-minded people interested in meeting travellers who are curious about other cultures and who intend to actively connect and learn from each other.

Couchsurfing membership is free. Anybody can be a member. Members complete an individual virtual page where they introduce themselves. Typically, they explain where they grew up, their occupation, studies, and hobbies. They also may include pictures, etc. On the profile page members also state how they can contribute to the community.

There are different ways to be active in Couchsurfing. First, it is possible to tell other members that you are available for a coffee or a drink. In that case, another member visiting your city could contact you to meet for a drink, invite you for a walk, go to museum and discover the city together. Second, it is also possible to be part of Couchsurfing and participate in the events organised by other members in your locality



or the place you happen to visit. These could be parties, excursions, language exchanges and visits to sites of interest. These are announced in the local sub-groups (for example the Helsinki Couchsurfing sub-group) within the website, and all members, local and foreign, happening to be in that city at the time of the activity can register on the sub-group and will be informed of activities in which they may participate or not. These sub-groups also serve as forums where people can exchange information on various topics in addition to meet-ups and happenings.

Another way to be an active couchsurfer (as the members of the community are called) is to offer a free place to stay called “hosting”. Many members of the Couchsurfing community have an extra bedroom or spare place where a visitor can sleep which is called “surfing”. Thus their door is open to the other members for a night or more. This hosting and surfing exchange is at the very heart of the Couchsurfing altruistic model. This is where the deepest encounters may happen between the members as they spend more time together. But in fact, it is more intense because two total strangers share a common physical space, in many cases the private space of the host, without any financial reward for the host.

Statistically speaking, nine years after the first website version was launched, there are about 6 million people from all over the world in the community (<http://www.Couchsurfing.org>). North Americans and Europeans make up 75% of them. Nevertheless, the community exists worldwide with members in about 97,000 cities in 207 countries, colonies, territories or states. 85% of the members are under 35 years of age and the men/women ratio is almost equal, slightly in favour of men. The number of people offering a free place to stay, such as a couch, is equal to the number of people interested in informal meetings and gatherings.

Couchsurfing primarily brings together people who can travel or are interested in travelling. Previous Couchsurfing statistics indicate that most members come from

Europe and North America. This might be related to the fact that people from Western countries have more money to travel. Nevertheless, Couchsurfing might give the opportunity for less wealthy people to travel because of the free accommodation and sometimes free meals the Couchsurfing system and its members can provide. Alternatively, there are Couchsurfing members who may never be capable to travel abroad but who are still interested to meet foreigners. People from poorer nations can decide to take part actively in the encounters, by meeting people from physically distant cultures. This is what Couchsurfing makes possible.

Apart from the intrinsic interest to meet with foreigners, these members from poorer countries need to have access to a computer and the internet. This could be restrictive for many, but these, as well as internet cafes, are a lot more accessible than a few years ago in at least reasonably sized towns<sup>1</sup>. Also, anybody who wants to be part of the network most likely needs to have some knowledge of global languages, yet we find on the Couchsurfing website some people that are members even if their knowledge of foreign languages is limited.

The idea that a worldwide virtual social network existing on the internet can transpose itself in real encounters where strangers from different countries can quickly interact and live together for a short time makes Couchsurfing a unique phenomenon. As a global network without borders, linking individuals directly, Couchsurfing is a movement that goes beyond the control of countries. By bringing people from different cultures together in the real world, briefly under the same roof, Couchsurfing also channels the cultural flows across borders which can potentially influence people's behaviour and cultural identity. All these dimensions or attributes establish

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<sup>1</sup> In 2012, the number of Internet users worldwide reached 2.27 billion, almost exactly twice what it was in 2007, 1.15 billion. Africa has gone from 34 million to 140 million, a 317% increase. Asia has gone from 418 million to over 1 billion, a 143% increase. The Middle East has gone from 20 to 77 million, a 294% increase. Latin America (South & Central America) has gone from 110 to 236 million, a 114% increase. Source: <http://royal.pingdom.com/2012/04/19/world-internet-population-has-doubled-in-the-last-5-years/>. Web. 26 Mar. 2013

Couchsurfing as a manifestation of the so-called globalization and is in itself a new global movement worth studying.

You can find couchsurfers in cities all over the world, even in remote places in Africa or on distant islands of the South Pacific. Couchsurfing as a truly global phenomenon has the potential to make unlikely encounters likely. It can unite under one roof an atheist man from a European socially multicultural metropolis with a religious woman from a highly gender-segregated provincial small town of the Middle East. Both of them might be strangers to each other, culturally far removed from each other, living in totally different societies, but interested in spending time together, helping each other out and hosting each other in an altruistic way. This type of unlikely non-virtual encounter would have hardly occurred in the past. First, there is the physical distance separating them. Second, there are the socio-cultural borders that would prevent such encounters. Yet, with the globalization and Couchsurfing as a new technology, they can and do happen.

To study these intercultural and inter-gender interactions and what they mean for the participants in their local context is a worthwhile undertaking. In this thesis, I investigate these encounters from the perspective of the women living in so-called conservative societies. In these societies where there is a wide gender gap, the practice of Couchsurfing, as a Western-born concept, might interfere with the local culture's acceptable standards of behaviours. My motivation is to understand why these women participate in Couchsurfing, how they participate and what the impacts are for them of this participation in this global network.

In this thesis, Couchsurfing is approached as social phenomenon, possible through globalization, used as a tool for local empowerment by women living in non-Western, highly gender-unequal societies. While noticing the need for these women to adapt the practice of Couchsurfing to their local socio-cultural reality, my focus is on the benefits

that motivate their participation in Couchsurfing. From the intercultural and inter-gender encounters they experience as well as from the network they develop locally, these reflexive selves construct their hybrid identity, they expand their realm of life possibilities, they create spaces for new experiences and they acquire valuable knowledge which bring them different forms of capital. The amalgam of these outcomes gives them more control over their lives and culminates in local empowerment for them.

The limited number of existing qualitative studies on Couchsurfing investigates the experiences of members from Western countries. Studies on the increasing amount of participants from non-Western countries who participate in Couchsurfing have not yet been conducted. Considering this absence of qualitative research on members from non-Western countries and their lived experiences, semi-structured interviews are the chosen research method approach here. This method to collect data will help to analyse how the experiences of the chosen respondents may affect them in similar ways is appropriate as “one of the strengths of the semi-structured interview is that it facilitates a strong element of discovery, while its structured focus allows an analysis in terms of commonalities” (Gillham 2005: 72).

Interviews were conducted online with six women from Africa, Asia and the Middle East who participate in the Couchsurfing community in their country and/or abroad. They guide foreign Western men in their locality, host them in their homes and/or stay with them while travelling.

## 1.1 Method

The semi-structured interview is used to obtain qualitative data. The technique usually consists of interviewing a subject face-to-face on a topic or theme to be explored from which the researcher aims to collect opinions or lived experiences. Consequently, the objective of the semi-structured interview is to understand the subject's point of view on the researched topic. A semi-structured interview follows an interview guide of open questions from which researchers may obtain information, but it also allows other questions to arise during the interview. Interviewees express their ideas during the interview, which can open the door to more questions from the interviewer, increasing the amount of information available to the researcher for analysis. The format of the interview is flexible, being closer to a conversation because the interviewer is not necessarily limited to the prepared questionnaire. Because of the nature of this format, the interviewer must establish a positive rapport with the interviewee as Bill Gillham (2005: 7) explains:

In an interview carried out for research purposes, the interviewer is the research instrument, and this means developing skills in facilitating the disclosures of the interviewee – standardized in that sense. But it is still one human being interacting with another and using their resources of interpersonal sensitivity to do so: the human instrument is not a machine. At the same time, the research interviewer has to become skilled at the task and capable of a degree of self-detachment including awareness of any preconceptions of the topic(s) being researched. (Gillham 2005: 7)

Also, the respondent may answer differently depending on how they perceive the interviewer. As Denscombe (2007: 184) demonstrate in his research, “In particular, the sex, the age, and the ethnic origins of the interviewer have a bearing on the amount of information people are willing to divulge and their honesty about what they reveal.”

Denscombe's work highlights the weaknesses of the method, which is mainly dependent on the reliability of the information collected. It is difficult for the researcher to know if the respondent is lying or if she/he recalls precisely the facts or emotions felt when explaining certain behaviour. Also, the interviewer may unconsciously bring

certain information or cues to the interview, orienting the respondent in a certain direction which impacts again the veracity of the data. Because the interviewees are conducted in a semi-structured way, the wording of the questions may vary between the participants, which again impacts the capacity to compare adequately the answers of the participants. At the same time, the amount of data collected may end up being too important to analyse which forces the researcher to decide what is pertinent and reduces the spectrum of explanations to the question investigated. Finally, due to the highly personal nature of the collected information, socio-cultural, gender related and linguistic realities may impact the veracity of the information and the capacity of the researcher to understand what may lie behind the respondent's answers in their socio-cultural context. For all these reasons, this method should not be used to generalise human behaviour.

Nevertheless, the advantage of this method is the capacity to obtain information on things that are difficult to observe. For example, by letting people converse about their personal experiences or opinions, it is possible to gain knowledge about meanings given to a situation or the subject's behaviour. At the same time, because new ideas may arise and new questions can be asked, the interviewer cannot pre-judge what is important or not to the discussion, and topics the interviewer has no knowledge of can easily come up. In that sense, it diminishes the interviewer's pre-assumptions and bias and more complex questions can be approached.

## **1.2 Material**

My objective was to collect data on the lived experiences of women living in countries in which gender divide is more rigidly constructed than in Western countries. Women from such countries participate in Couchsurfing in their country or abroad by guiding foreign Western men in their locality, hosting them in their house and/or staying with them while travelling. I used Skype to conduct semi-structured interviews where I asked open questions. My interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed as text. I used a

grounded theory approach where no hypothesis exists a priori. Concepts and categories emerged from the data collected.

### **1.2.1 Interviewee selection**

In order to explore the experience from a specific group of couchsurfers from non-Western countries, I decided that the profile of the people I interview would meet the following criteria:

- a) They are women
- b) They come from a country with a wide gender gap
- c) They have had experiences hosting male travellers or being their guides, travelling with foreign men in their home country, or surfing at the homes of foreign men abroad

Couchsurfing was conceived and blossomed rapidly in Western countries considered more liberal, where men and women usually have more equal chances of success, more equal access to education, and where men and women can meet freely, talk and exchange opinions compared to many non-Western societies. In most Western societies, especially in urban areas, it is generally acceptable for a woman to welcome a foreign man in her house for a night or two and to walk freely around town with him without raising too much suspicion from her neighbors. This hosting-surfing exchange is the heart of the Couchsurfing experience and I would argue that it is more likely to happen in a liberal or a so-called open-minded society. The interest of this study is what happens when these encounters occur in non-Western societies.

My second criterion on gender gap aims, furthermore, to narrow down the profile of the interviewees to participants from more “conservative” countries. I will use the Global

Gender Gap Index<sup>2</sup> to pinpoint countries with wider gender gaps where women may not have the same freedom to get involved in Couchsurfing and host men or ‘hang around’ with them freely without raising questions from their neighbours or their immediate families. The index is described as follows:

The Index is designed to measure gender-based gaps in access to resources and opportunities in individual countries rather than the actual levels of the available resources and opportunities in those countries. [...] the Index is constructed to rank countries on their gender gaps not on their development level. [...] The Global Gender Gap Index, [...] rewards countries for smaller gaps in access to these resources, regardless of the overall level of resources. (Global Gender Gap World Economic Forum 2012, 3–4 )

The objective of the Forum is to produce a ranking of countries that presents the extent of inequalities between men and women. The Forum collates and analyses data in order to have a better image of the gaps persisting between women and men regarding “four fundamental categories (sub-indexes): economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment” (Global Gender Gap World Economic Forum 2012, 3–4). Cultural aspects and country policies are not taken into account.

According to the index’s ranking and phraseology, in the countries at the bottom of the ranking, we can presume that women usually have less access to education, less access to the internet. Consequently, they may not have the sufficient level of English to be active in the Couchsurfing virtual community and interact with foreigners. Countries with wider gender gaps are usually (but not necessary) considered to be poorer countries where travelling is a luxury that may never be accessible for most women. Consequently, interviewing women participating in Couchsurfing from countries with a wide gender gap and that are most probably from poor countries meets the study’s

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<sup>2</sup> World Economic Forum (2012). “The Global Gender Gap Report 2012.” [Web] [24 Mar. 2013]. Available at : [http://www3.weforum.org/doCouchsurfing/WEF\\_GenderGap\\_Report\\_2012.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/doCouchsurfing/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2012.pdf)



objective of hearing the narratives of women who are not from Western countries and for whom the concept of Couchsurfing is likely to interfere with local customs.

In this study, my respondents come from countries that are often considered as conservative: Iran, Morocco, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia and Malaysia. These countries ranked from number 86 to 129 on the 135 countries that were listed in the index.

Ultimately, considering the fact that my interviewees come from conservative societies where the idea of Couchsurfing would not likely come from for socio-cultural reasons, but they still decide to take part in it and feel part of it, I suspect their motivations to differ, and that the ways they use the system and the benefits they obtain from it could provide a fresh perspective on the participation of women from conservative countries in online communities such as Couchsurfing.

### **1.2.2 Procedure**

Once I selected the countries with a lower ranking on the Global Gender Gap Index, I used the Couchsurfing website's research engine to find women with profiles that meet the study's criteria. My next step was to convince six women to participate in a semi-structured interview on Skype. I made first contact with potential participants by e-mail, briefly explaining that I was doing a research on Couchsurfing with people from non-Western countries. I proposed to my respondent a first informal conversation to answer their questions regarding my study. Subsequently, if they felt comfortable, we arranged to set up a time for an approximate 90 minutes interview.

Seven women agreed to participate. One of the interviews was rejected due to the limited oral English proficiency of the interviewee. All the interviewees were familiar with Skype and had used it before. They all had a camera and a fast internet connection that allowed for an effective video conference. These details show how they are already connected to the world, using the internet to communicate with people, most probably not only by writing. All my interviews were videotaped with a sufficient image quality and with the consent of my interviewees.

### **1.2.3 Limitations**

It was difficult to find women who can host men in their house in for example, Yemen because it is socio-culturally almost impossible for a woman to do so. Ultimately, I found four women living with their families and two living alone. All my candidates had a sufficient level of English to be capable to describe their experience beyond generalities with a relatively elaborate vocabulary. This inevitably questions how conservative my interviewee actually was. However, I still believe they meet the previously stated criteria as they must deal with a community that may question and judge their involvement with males through Couchsurfing. They still participate in a global network that presumably has impacts for them and for their locality.

Other limitations concerned the communication aspects. I used Skype to conduct the interviews, which limited my capacity to monitor effectively all the non-verbal communication of my interviewee. Nevertheless, certain non-verbal details were noted and provided in the transcript of the interviews. Furthermore, as explained earlier, I was a male interviewer from a different country asking them question about their participation in Couchsurfing, which could leave them open to judgment locally by their peers. In this context, the interviewees may not have been comfortable expressing themselves openly about situations affecting their reputation, and may have thought that I, too, would judge them for their behaviour.

### 1.2.4 Profiles of the respondents

Here is a brief profile of the women interviewed with the data collected in March 2013 on the Couchsurfing website. Precautions must be taken to avoid connecting my interviewees' Couchsurfing public profile with the information given during the narrative interview. For this reason, throughout the data analysis, I have hidden precise information. This is marked by a (\*123\*) insertion in the text.

Accordingly, in the following profile presentation, ages and years of membership to Couchsurfing are given approximately. The same applies to the number of countries visited using Couchsurfing as they are reported on the individuals' profiles. The country ranking information is taken from the Global Gender Gap Report 2012 published by the World Economic Forum.<sup>3</sup>

#### Interviewee 1 (I1)<sup>4</sup>

Country: Ethiopia (Ranked 118 on 135)	Age: 25-30
No. of years on Couchsurfing: 1-2	No. of years of Education: 17
No. of countries visited using Couchsurfing: 2	
Experiences hosting men: yes, several	Experiences being hosted by men: None
Living situation: Alone in urban area	Marital status: Single

**Table 1.** Profile of the interviewee 1

<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum (2012). "The Global Gender Gap Report 2012." [Web] [24 Mar. 2013]. Available at : [http://www3.weforum.org/doCouchsurfing/WEF\\_GenderGap\\_Report\\_2012.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/doCouchsurfing/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2012.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> References to the interviewees will be presented as " I1" for Interviewee 1, "I2" for Interviewee 2, etc.

## Interviewee 2 (I2)

Country: Morocco (Ranked 129 on 135)	Age: 35-40
No. of years on Couchsurfing: 3-5 years	No. of years of Education: 15
No of countries visited using Couchsurfing: 3	
Experiences hosting men: Yes, several	Experiences being hosted by men: Yes, many
Living situation: Alone in urban area	Marital status: Single

**Table 2.** Profile of the interviewee 2

## Interviewee 3 (I3)

Country: Indonesia (Ranked 97 on 135)	Age: 35-40
No. of years on Couchsurfing: More than 1 year	No. of years of Education: 22
No. of countries visited using Couchsurfing: None at the time of the interview. 1 in March 2013.	
Experiences hosting men: Yes	Experiences being hosted by men: No
Living situation: With her siblings in a small city	Marital status: Single at the time of the interview. Recently got married to a foreigner

**Table 3.** Profile of the interviewee 3

## Interviewee 4 (I4)

Country: Bangladesh (Ranked 86 on 135)	Age: 25-26
No. of years on Couchsurfing: More than 5 years	No. of years of Education: 21
No. of countries visited using Couchsurfing: 3	
Experiences hosting men: No	Experiences being hosted by men: Yes
Living situation: With her mom in urban area	Marital status: Single

**Table 4.** Profile of the interviewee 4

## Interviewee 5 (I5)

Country: Malaysia (Ranked 100 on 135) (Also lived in the Gulf area).	Age: 25-30
No. of years on Couchsurfing: 3-5 years	No. of years of Education: 19
No. of countries visited using Couchsurfing: 7	
Experiences hosting men: No	Experiences being hosted by men: Yes
Living situation: With roommate in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Used to live alone in the Europe	Marital status: Single

**Table 5.** Profile of the interviewee 5

## Interviewee 6 (I6)

Country: Iran (Ranked 127 on 135)	Age: 35-40
No. of years on Couchsurfing: More than 2 years	No. of years of Education: 17
No of countries visited using Couchsurfing: 4	
Experiences hosting men: Yes	Experiences being hosted by men: Yes
Living situation: With her mother in the capital	Marital status: Single

**Table 6.** Profile of the interviewee 6

None of my interviewees was under the age of 25 and they were all single at the time of the interview. They were all University educated, they all had used the Couchsurfing system to be hosted abroad and/or to host foreigners in their country or country of temporary residence. In all cases, they had no objections to staying with foreign men or hosting foreign men.

This could raise questions of how marginal these women would be considered in their country or how representative are they of their fellow women couchsurfers. They are definitely more educated and have more freedom (to be unmarried or to live alone notably) than the majority of women surrounding them. They may have more liberal parents who are themselves aware of the importance to be educated and to speak English (or another foreign language). I chose to interview them based on the fact that they are using the service in their country and/or abroad. They may have views and experiences that portray how Couchsurfing can be used in different cultural settings by women from highly gender unequal societies and how they can benefit from it. This said, Couchsurfing is a rather particular idea and practice. A minority of people are interested or capable to trust total strangers with basic information from a website and this is true even in Western countries where the Couchsurfing idea was developed. In

that sense, Couchsurfing is not a mainstream movement. Its members, wherever they are, can somehow be understood as sharing common motivations, values and practices that reaches a minority of people.

### **1.3 Previous studies**

Since there has been little research on the Couchsurfing community up until now, the literature on the topic is limited to a handful of theses and short articles on two subjects: Couchsurfing as a new form of tourism and the issue of trust.

#### **1.3.1 Couchsurfing as a new form of tourism**

In 2007, Paula Bialski studied Couchsurfing as part of her Masters' thesis at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Warsaw (Poland). The work titled *Intimate Tourism. Friendships in a state of mobility — The case of the online hospitality network* is still the most extensive study on Couchsurfing to date. It is based on qualitative and quantitative data. This research is the only detailed one on the motivations of the couchsurfers so far.

As a starting point, Bialski interviewed couchsurfers, mainly from the Western world, who gathered in Montreal to volunteer for rebuilding the Couchsurfing's website. Subsequently, she collected more qualitative and quantitative data through online surveys. She also had access to data provided by Couchsurfing.

According to her, the profile of the average couchsurfer in 2007 was:

[...]a young white male who speaks English and lives in a developed nation. While there are many users who do not fit this description, the more different they are, the less likely it is that they will be involved in this community. This is especially true for persons living in the developing world who likely do not have easy access to the fundamental prerequisite for using these services: computers and the Internet. Thus, the sample population found on these websites is not truly “Global” -- hospitality network members are really much less diverse than a geographical representation of worldwide users might suggest. (Bialski 2007: 6)

Bialski investigated the motivation of couchsurfers. Starting with the idea that couchsurfers use the system for travelling, she proposed the idea that travelling for meeting new people is also linked to the idea of learning. Thus, the user of this social travel network takes part in this community most probably in order to meet other travel-interested people in real life and then learn from them. She continues:

All my collected research shows that Couchsurfing individuals have an intrinsic need for “personal growth” or “personal development” – meaning the improvement of one’s entire being, sense of self, and/or outlook on the world. (Bialski 2007: 40)

This personal growth comes with these quite exciting and intense connections with complete strangers (Bialski 2007: 16). Couchsurfers seek friendships that are “deep, adventurous, and intense, often life-changing to some degree. The individuals seek weight, depth, and intensity, and if these factors are not met, then contacts are disposed of” (Bialski 2007: 64).

According to Bialski, the couchsurfer travels for discovery and is the product of a “post-modern tourism characterized by individuals who are using mobility as a means to an exploratory, soul-searching, end, which will (hopefully for them) allow them to find and fulfil their ‘life purpose’” (Bialski 2007: 27).



Through her findings, she claimed that the post-modern tourist is not only looking to stimulate the five senses, but seeks a deeper experience, “an existential, psychological, perhaps even spiritual level which only the intense, intimate experience of human-to-human emotion can evoke” (Bialski 2007:24). She argues that

[...] stretching the ‘sightseeing’ concept to the experience that the individual has when being hosted by a couchsurfer denotes a shift in the experience of gazing onto an object, to a human-to-human experience locked in emotion, something that an intimate interpersonal relationship provides. (Bialski 2007: 33)

Post-modern tourists would not necessarily see touristic attractions and collect souvenirs from the visited places; they would be more interested in collecting real emotional experiences (Bialski 2007: 34). Couchsurfing creates the intimacy that makes these connections possible and is a vehicle of this new tourism trend. Bialski called this “Intimate Tourism”. (Bialski 2007)

Michael O’Regan explored CS as a new form of tourism and discussed it in his article *New technologies of the self and social networking sites: hospitality exchange clubs and the changing nature of tourism and identity*. O’Regan is himself a couchsurfer. He investigated Couchsurfing as an identity-constructing tool. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with fifteen couchsurfers from an undetermined place before 2009, he proposed that shaping one’s identity through new technologies such as blogs and social networks is different in Couchsurfing. According to the author, Couchsurfing member’s identities are

[...] more persistent identities which can be maintained over both periods of mobility and fixity; whether the individual is “at home” or “away” helping individuals produce themselves as “proper subjects” through coconstructors and thereby bringing about significant changes to personal mobilities; conventional and normative leisure mobilities; knowledge and identity construction; socialization and self-expression.” (O’Regan 2009: 24)

After explaining what Couchsurfing is, the author introduces the concept on reputation within the community and argues that the reputations developed on Couchsurfing

[...]carry a permanent archive of past contributions and actions, acting as permanent reminders, a particular narrative and a consistent identity. Profiles, not only represent the individual, their cosmopolitan disposition but they also continually represent the individuals themselves in the context of their mobility as well as their (global) potential for mobility in the context of the global, even when temporally immobile. (O'Reagan 2009: 27)

Couchsurfing links identity created through reciprocity, reputation management and mobility. This brings the author to a discourse on locality, placelessness and this new tourism reality as being possible through Couchsurfing and conceived by the couchsurfers themselves. At the same time, because couchsurfers constantly show themselves in their mobility and fixity, the concept of mobility and dwelling “are increasingly bound up with others” (O'Reagan 2009: 36).

The Couchsurfer finds in this practice a new space for self-expression and self-transformation, a new sense of place even at home, but also “gain status, social capital and self-esteem by exercising agency, building a real and virtual representative reputation of autonomy, commitment and independence, which are developed and managed through reputation management” (O'Reagan 2009: 36).

Finally, the author argues that this encounter happening in the real world forms the “basis for new cultural and social productions” (O'Reagan 2009: 36), but also helps people “in becoming self-transformed, self-directed, self-managed.” (O'Reagan 2009: 36)

This new practice or new communication space between the couchsurfers shapes the new borders of tourism where travelling is

[...] less collectively practiced and bounded to specific times, routes and paths, replaced by a more varied, flexible, personal and subjective pattern, as people

live their lives in and through Couchsurfing, altering how they organize their lives.” (O’Reagan 2009: 37)

### **1.3.2 Couchsurfing and the concept of trust**

It is easy to conceive of how people would feel unsafe about inviting strangers to stay in their home. On the other hand, it is not any safer to surf and stay at a stranger’s place. Therefore, Couchsurfing is an interesting laboratory to investigate the question of trust in general but also trust in an online community.

In 2009 Debra Lauterbach, Hung Truong, Tanuj Shah and Lada Adamic published a study entitled *Surfing a web of trust: Reputation and Reciprocity on CouchSurfing.com* using a quantitative approach to investigate the reputation and trust tools on the Couchsurfing’s website.

After explaining the Couchsurfing concept, the authors describe the reputation mechanisms. These mainly consist of the vouching system, the verification system and the online references tool. They conclude that the vouching system does not necessarily bring valuable information to the Couchsurfer in regards to trusting the other members.

Their “analysis of network properties and patterns of user behaviour for reciprocity as well as vouching” (Lauterbach & al. 2009: 1) ends with the demand that “CouchSurfing and other online communities improve the quality of their reputation systems” (Lauterbach & al. 2009: 7).

In another study on how Couchsurfers rate each other, Chun-Yuen Teng, Debra Lauterbach, and Lada A. Adamic (2010) analyse how various factors may contribute to how Couchsurfers, Amazon and Epinions users give ratings.

First, they show how the choice of options given to rate others influences their ratings. Second, they investigate “whether properties of the users themselves and those that they are rating correlate with the ratings given” (Teng & al. 2010: 6). Using demographic data provided by the Couchsurfing website on gender, age and geography, they make correlations between these factors and the trust ratings on Couchsurfing. According to them, “there are biases in how we humans evaluate each other’s trustworthiness, and these should be taken into account when trust ratings are gathered and utilized” (Teng & al. 2010: 7).

Their general findings show that ratings can be misleading. They point out that users should not believe these ratings. According to them, the context of the rating should be examined. For example,

[...]public, identified ratings tend to be disproportionately positive, but only when the ratee is another user who can reciprocate. Further evidence of reciprocity is in the alignment of public Couch-Surfing friendship ratings, but far less alignment in the privately given trust ratings. (Teng & al. 2010: 8)

A mathematical approach to the question of trust in online networks was presented by Patricia Victora, Chris Cornelisa, Martine DeCockb and Enrique Herrera-Viedmac (2010). The authors use the Couchsurfing website and its trust mechanisms, in order to bring light to the issue of “representation, propagation and aggregation of distrust” (Victora, P. et al. 2010: 20). With a bilattice-based logical reasoning and using the trust maximizing operator TMAX as well as the knowledge maximizing operator KMAX, they investigate which “requirements a trust score aggregator needs to fulfil” (Victora & al. 2010: 20). Their findings are summarised as follows:

[O]ur experiments on a large data set from CouchSurfing demonstrated that they achieve more accurate results in real-world social applications, which are inherently noisy. Obviously, the reported performances do not only depend on the choice of aggregation operator, but also on the combination with propagation, which inherently introduces errors in the computation too. Hence, a first step in our future research is the investigation of the synergy between the two operator types and their separate influence on the accuracy. (Victoria & al. 2010: 20)

Jun-E Tan (2010) studies the concept of trust within the Couchsurfing community applying an interpretative approach and using the theoretical framework of “suspension and the leap of faith” developed by Guido Möllering (Möllering 2006). This approach looks at trust in terms of “dealing with irreducible vulnerability and uncertainty” (Tan 2010: 367). The author collected qualitative data from fifteen couchsurfers through in-depth interviews on the subject of trust in order to grasp the insider’s opinion on the system and to examine the context in which trust is formed.

Tan affirms using Möllering’s theoretical background because it is “useful to guide the observation of how different people have different strategies of coming to terms with irreducible vulnerability and uncertainty” (Tan 2010: 376).

After a brief explanation of Möllering’s approach, Tan shows that couchsurfers do not share a clear picture or definition of trust and they also have different ways of analysing the couchsurfers’ profiles in order to evaluate their level of trustworthiness.

A few strategies to deal with vulnerability and uncertainty emerged from her interviews that show participants handling “suspension” as she calls it.

Through “suspension”, the actions of the Couchsurfers can be better understood, by means of understanding the strategies used to make the leap of faith, and how the Couchsurfer can decide *not* to make the leap, hence withdrawing trust. (Tan 2010: 379)

The study reveals that couchsurfers' concept of trust and trustworthiness "did not only involve physical safety, but also the feeling of being accepted as part of the larger, open-minded community" (Tan 2010: 379). According to the author, this finding reveals how relevant Möllering's approach is, "focusing on the actors' interpretation of the social reality that they live in, especially in studying concepts as elusive and abstract as trust" (Tan 2010: 379).

Devan Rosen, Pascale Roy Lafontaine and Blake Hendrickson (2011) bring a deeper understanding of the question of trust as seen from the users of Couchsurfing.

Hoping to find explanations for "why individuals engage in trust and exchange relationships online and offline" (Devan & al. 2011: 3), they tested three hypotheses and attempted to answer three research questions. The first two hypotheses and two research questions were as follows:

Hypotheses 1: Members who have only exchanged information through the website, opposed to those that have also communicated face-to-face, will report a lower sense of belonging to the community.

Research Question 1: Which engagement activities generate the strongest sense of belonging to the community?

Hypotheses 2: Members will be more inclined to consider a CouchSurfing request if the e-mail is sent specifically to them, as opposed to a group e-mail sent to multiple recipients.

Research Question 2: Will increased engagement in the community change the preferences of CouchSurfing request types? (Devan & al. 2011: 8)

After a brief explanation of the concept of trust using definitions developed by Whitworth and De Moor, Cook, Putnam or Rohe, the authors raised another hypotheses and a third research question:

Hypotheses 3: Trust and sense of belonging will be positively associated.

Research Question 3: Which engagement activity[ies] in the community are most associated with increased trust in the community? (Devan & al. 2011: 9)

Using an online survey they collected data from 1094 Couchsurfing members from 82 countries. Different statistical methods were used to evaluate the sense of community and to assess feelings of connectedness.

Findings confirmed that couchsurfers who have met face-to-face with other members of the community have a higher sense of belonging to the Couchsurfing community than those who have not. Also, repeated participation in gatherings was positively related to a sense of belonging to the community, and hosting also positively improved the relationship with trust in the community. (Devan & al. 2011:2)

## 2 IDENTITIES IN GLOBAL AND LOCAL CONTEXTS

Couchsurfing is a phenomenon of globalization, and it expedites globalization by bringing people from all over the world together. However, globalization has many facets, and there are different approaches for defining globalization. Therefore, it is relevant to explain, first, how globalization is understood in this study, and, second, how Couchsurfing inserts itself in globalization and instigates new dialogues between global influences and local practices. It is necessary, then, to explain the dynamics between the global and the local in order to demonstrate in the analysis how the women interviewed perceive themselves as being influenced by global cultural flows, and how they construct their global and local identities using Couchsurfing. The idea of the global meeting the local is the starting point of the discussion of the concept of “hybrid identity”. The concept of hybrid identity flourishes within the new realm of globalization, and Couchsurfing can be seen as a community where the cultural influences that people can choose from are multiplied.

However, hybridity here is linked to the concept of the reflexive self. Since Couchsurfing as an intimate form of tourism gives people the opportunity to experience new ways of life. It also confronts its users with an array of new choices. Therefore, the Couchsurfer’s reflexive self is a self that must make choices about what it wants to become. The notion of the reflexive self is used here to express how making choices can itself be viewed as a manifestation of the globalization, but is also a step towards agency and empowerment. The notion of choice is important here as it opens the doors to the next part of this chapter, where making choices and acquiring new knowledge and gaining new experiences are linked to the idea of agency. At the same time, Couchsurfing not only provides the reflexive self with more possibilities. It also creates spaces where participants acquire new knowledge and gain new experiences, theoretically presented here as forms of capital. This is important because I will show that the women interviewed gain more freedom and agency locally by acquiring new forms of capital by participating in Couchsurfing.



## 2.1 Globalization

I wrote earlier that Couchsurfing brings people of different cultures together and this was possible because Couchsurfing is a result of globalization. I need to point out at this stage that human beings have been meeting, trading and mixing with “the others” for centuries (Kraidy 2005: 3). Intercultural exchanges existed before the first anthropologists started exploring the exotic non-Western cultures. What is different today are the scope and the pace of these cross-cultural encounters and influences, and they have to be understood within the reality that this new broader paradigm humanity is experiencing called globalization.

As a concept, globalization can be seen as a rupture with the past, a disjuncture, a fragmentation in the course of history, a new era. (Lewellen 2002: 10). In his book *Anthropology of Globalization: Cultural Anthropology Enters the 21st Century*, Ted C. Lewellen (2002: 11) explains that “what is occurring today is somewhat different; influences once felt as distant, abstract, and incomprehensible are quite immediate, the links more clearly visible, the presence of the global experienced more directly.”

The sociologist Anthony Giddens defines globalization as

the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. (Giddens 1990: 64)

Other scholars argue that globalization is not the simple infliction of experiences of a certain group over another, but that globalization informs and reshapes people’s life in potentially ambiguous, indeterminate and unanticipated ways (McElhinny 2007: 25).

These attempts to circumscribe the concept as a process where distances and borders of social relations are taking place in a much smaller world are not complete if we omit the structural roots of globalization. For many scholars, the fundamental basis of globalization is economic and technological (Lister 2006: 31). The seeds of the expansion of neoliberal capitalism on a global scale with its flows of capital and goods were planted during the colonial conquests, but it is only in the recent decades that technological advancement in transport and information technology made people and places in the world more extensively and densely connected to each other (Lewellen 2002: 8). Neoliberal capitalism as an economic system has been able to dominate globally after the fall of iron curtain. As a result, the global, the national, the regional and the local can be seen as more closely interrelated than ever before. Even the most remote society is now integrated into this global world and affected by this new reality (Lewellen 2002: 11).

The expansion of the capitalist mode of production with its multinational actors, backed by a global financial system, can now spread its activities around the world (Lewellen 2002: 7–8). Production units can be localised according to companies' market of consumers, costs of production or access to raw materials. The same model can be reproduced or standardised all around the world depending on the companies' profitability. Produced goods can be shifted to the other end of the world, processed, assembled and send all over the world again (Mittelman 2000: 48). This international division of labour and of production can be seen as a way for poorer countries to develop, but it is also a way for the richer to get richer and disparities to increase (Mittelman 2000: 74). Companies invest in a locality to organize a production unit. It creates employment, it pours money in the local economy and potentially, it improves economic standards. At the same time, this same locality starts consuming goods that are produced and sold by corporations established thousands of miles away who organize the production and distribution of those goods globally. This is where we see the remote village being integrated in the economic global system (Mittleman 2000: 24–30).

The locally produced commodity will now have to compete with global products. Local economies will be forced to adapt. The local producer will need to match or die. Such structural economic changes disrupt traditional means of production and forces competitiveness. It will also integrate women into the work force, usually as factory workers, in countries where they traditionally stayed at home. As workers, they also become consumers. Ultimately, this new reality bonds all human beings into a common consumer-producer relationship on a global scale market. (Mittelman 2000: 226)

On the political front, globalization challenges the very heart of the socio-political organization humans have had since the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup>, the nation-state. Until recently, the nation-state was the seat of a sovereign government: sovereign over its population and over its territory. It had more power and a greater ability to influence, contain and control within specific borders. It could act upon the economy in a chosen direction and entirely control the media. With globalization, political life, economic life and cultural influences no longer obey national boundaries (Kraidy 2005: 41). The nation-state was the “predominant organizing principle of the social experience” (Levitt 2011: 166) and socio-economic development; however globalization forces the relations between the state, its territoriality, its economic levers and its national identity to be reconfigured (Berking 2004: 64). Couchsurfing, in that sense, is a good example of a movement that crosses boundaries and which escapes countries’ control.

For example, in certain cases, if not most of them, the exercise of power by a state was forced to change with the institutionalization of pressure groups such as union organizations, pro-democratic elements or feminist groups importing their battles from abroad. The states also need more and more to comply with international standards regarding rules of law, finance or trading questions. Once inserted into the global

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<sup>5</sup> Most theories see the nation state as a 19th-century European phenomenon, but scholars argue about the beginning of the nation-state, some placing it at as far as the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Cf. Hobsbawm, Eric J. (1992), and Branch, Jordan Nathaniel (2011)

economy, countries with a weaker economy had to follow structural adjustment policies, dictated by international organizations. (Lewellen 2002: 234)

These examples show a politically weakening state, no longer in total control of its internal responsibilities or power prerogatives because of outside forces. At the same time, the idea of democracy is also spread globally which pressures political powers in certain states. That said, the nation-state is not going to disappear, but its degrees and types of interventions are changing. (Lewellen 2002: 199)

Internally, on the front of national unity, states must deal with new realities. International migrants may need a few generations before expressing loyalty towards the state (Lewellen 2002: 234). At the other end, suppressed nationalistic movements which started having a voice abroad can jeopardize the national unity and national identity, resulting in new power dynamics, new nationalistic political parties or conflicts within the states (Mittleman 2000: 170).

The transformations in frontiers of power, the changing nature of the state ascendance on its population, the porosity of its socio-economic and political boundaries to global influences puts the nation-state on the defensive (Hibou 2004: 339). The validity of that later concept being so often questioned, not to say bulldozed, other key concepts of the social-sciences must be critically reviewed (Munck 2005: 14). One of them is the concept of identity.

One of the hallmarks of globalization is certainly what Castells identified as “a world of uncontrolled, confusing change”. Confronted with increasing global flows of wealth, power and images, the individual struggles to create and maintain her or his meaning and identity. The concept of globalization allows for the expression of a personal sense of change, including the loss of old national, gender, ethnic or professional identities. (Lister 2006: 36)

The notion of global flows or global fluids introduced here is widely used to represent the idea of transnational forces surpassing the nation-state and having an impact on societies. On the cultural or identity level, global flows of cultural elements travel across borders with ideologies, ideas and social norms that can reach remote localities through mass media such as television, radio, the internet or advertisements (Lewellen 2002: 11). They can also be carried through societies with transnational migrants influencing their home communities or by foreign tourists visiting a locality.

These cultural inflows have the potential to transform local meanings of norms, behaviours and values, penetrating societies with the help of new technologies in an unprecedented facility with unpredictable impacts on all societies and their cultural identity. With globalization, “we are moving from an organized world of structures and barriers to one based on networks and global flows” (Munck 2005: 14) culminating in a potentially more conscious interdependence between all human beings and where a forced dialogue is taking place between the global and the local — a dialogue such as the one we can observe within the Couchsurfing network.

## **2.2 Local and Global**

The global forces from outside are meeting the local reality. We could be tempted to see these two realities or these two worlds as clashing, being in conflict with each other. This was how social scientists were debating globalization theory a few decades ago (Kraidy 2005: 154). But as the world was experiencing globalization, it started to be obvious that the global cannot exist without the local (Schuerkens 2004: 20): “We cannot dissociate global forces from local life-worlds as they are linked by mutually dependent processes” (Schuerkens 2004: 2).

The “local life-worlds” would be a good starting point to try to circumscribe “the local”.

The essential elements of the local can be found in local daily life, which Hannerz calls the 'form-of-life frame'. This frame includes daily activities in household, workplace and neighbourhood, daily emotional face-to-face relations to other close people, daily uses of symbolic forms; in short, all these elements 'which we largely take for granted as parts of local life.' (Schuerkens 2004: 20)

The local life-worlds with its daily life, its form-of-life frame is the site of meaning construction. It is where the idea of self-belonging originates and can be claimed. The local is also the space where multitudes of influences meet and where power struggles and social actions take place. The local is therefore pervasive, susceptible to influences and does the same when it meets with globalization forces. Its answer to the global flows varies according to local traditional structures, political forces, the economic reality and other social settings. It is in the local space that the global flows are embodied, confronted, resisted or adapted to the unique condition found in the local reality.

Global forces and local life-worlds can no longer be considered separate entities (Schuerkens 2004: 12). They "exist simultaneously and are constitutive of each other" (Khan 2006: 136). The notion of "glocalization" tries to integrate this idea of both global and local as mutually constitutive (Kraidy 2005: 154) as they are constantly infiltrating each other. The globalization is penetrating the local and the local is resisting, adapting, partially integrating or confronting the global flows. Both concepts are closely linked, and their relationship is not static: "These are not stable dyads but historically produced and shifting relationships. In other words, these pairings are themselves part of the temporality and historicity of globalization" (Ferguson 2008: 16).

Long (1996: 47) describes how the global and the local influence each other reciprocally: "[...] 'local' situations are transformed by becoming part of wider 'global' arenas and processes, while 'global' dimensions are made meaningful in relation to

specific ‘local’ conditions and through the understandings and strategies of ‘local actors.’”

Schuerkens, too, remarks:

There exists consequently a situation of continuous interaction of local cultural elements and global cultural influences. Both participate in the local cultural construction of local meanings and cultural forms. (Schuerkens 2004: 21)

Global and local are concepts used to understand structures and processes (Katz 2001: 1228). They are “not actual stable physical places. They are interpretive frames, not trans-historic essences or fixed traits of places” (Ferguson 2008: 339). The local cannot necessarily be understood as someone’s home village, but rather a space where people, or an individual construct meanings and identities (Ferguson 2008: 353). For example, migrants in a new country will bring parts of their local into the new country, but will continue integrating elements of globalization in their own individual way in the new country. The local cannot be seen solely as a territorial space exercising influence.

[...] locality is primarily relational and contextual rather than scalar or spatial. For analytical purposes, the local is now something people carry with them; it has been deterritorialized. The local is thus more complex than previously conceived; it is not just a given of any situation, but must be produced. It must also be constantly reinforced, since its very malleability threatens it with dissolution. (Lewellen 2002: 190–191)

The capacity of today’s technology to transcend space with its global flows makes the experience of globalization inherently local, embodied (Kraidy 2005: 42) and proximate:

The importance of electronic media stems from their ability to connect hitherto relatively isolated spheres of life with relatively continuous streams of sounds, images, ideas, and information. This heightened ‘complex connectivity’ [Tomlinson, 1999] links a multitude of “local” communities, thus forming the communicative space of global culture. Because of the ability of contemporary technologies to transcend time and space, they have accelerated the process of cultural globalization and at the same time expanded its range. (Kraidy 2005: 21)

This complex connectivity between this global spatial proximity and the local should be understood as “world-scale social relations”, not limited to spatial boundaries and geographical areas with difficult-to-define parameters (McElhinny 2008: 7–8). Life-space in today’s world is restructured and “deterritorialized”. Social relations between individuals include the world as a space and they do not stop at the national frontier: “Individuals are linked in local societies to changes at the global level” (Schuerkens 2004: 16), and social relationships are less often determined by spatial location.

Nevertheless, as much as we can talk about an interpenetrated globalization, we can question the power relation between the global and the local. Most of the adaptation is done by the local receiving flows from the global, but at the same time, the global is not threaten by local resistances and can also be quite accommodating (Lewellen 2002: 193). In spite of it all, “[...] every global is somebody’s local, but not everybody’s local is equally authoritative or desired” (Ferguson 2008: 339). In that sense, are the global and local equal forces?

The flow of globalization is thought to emanate from this Western industrial, technological, commercial and cultural world, and many would be tempted to suggest that the world is becoming standardized and more uniform by the Western influence (Schuerkens 2004: 18). With globalization, multinational corporations, mainly from United States and Europe, could start expanding their markets around the globe and we are still today in a North-dominated market that created inequalities and poverty. A



priori, it is true that we observed an exclusively Western influence spreading across the world at the beginning of the globalization era. Continuing inflows of Western cultural elements controlled by the West and reaching audiences through various media carried values, norms and lifestyles almost without boundaries. However, we observe today a much more complex picture in terms of Western global cultural flow: Telenovelas are watched in West Africa; non-Western music and literature find audience in Europe and America; tourists from everywhere are searching for authentic places in all corners of the world; and the Western world's interest in eastern spirituality, yoga and alternative medicine is indisputable (Schuerkens 2004: 23).

True, as the long reach of CNN, McDonald's, and Coca-Cola suggests, globalization is heavily American, but it also comes in other forms, such as the croissant and reggae music. Moreover, like other countries, the United States itself has experienced the disruptions caused by evolving global structures. Although in a different structural position than are other parts of the world, mid-America, too, is shocked by the pressures of hypercompetition, new technologies, and a shifting labor market. As a result, the character and complexion of U.S. cities have changed perceptibly, as have their ways of life (Mittelman 2000: 17–18)

I cannot end this local and global discourse about globalization without acknowledging the fact that globalization with its neoliberal capitalism aggravates inequalities, endangers indigenous traditional cultures, spreads consumerism as a way of life (with its environmentally disastrous implications) or that it disempowers the weakest elements of societies. Since its historical origins are in the West, globalization does look like neo-colonialism from the West, spreading certain undesirable realities but also imposing a certain homogenization in human rights, democratization, and consumerism to name a few. Nevertheless, its finality is not a process where reproduction of Western patterns is happening blindly. The post-traditional society is a global society where all traditional aspects are shaped by new forms of interdependence (Schuerkens 2004: 16) or a plurality of coping strategies:

[G]lobalization should not be apprehended as a struggle between Western norms and local norms, between cultural identity and political identity, or between religious logics and state logics. Instead, it should be viewed as the articulation between different forms of affiliation and a plurality of referents and strategies, which are identity-related but also political. (Hibou 2004: 345)

Ultimately, on the cultural front, the fear of the Americanisation of the whole world has not materialised. The global cultural flow is not one-way; it is a global intercultural exchange. In the emerging post-traditional society, the dialogue between the local and the global is increasingly and inextricably intertwined. On one hand, the global flows are spreading all over the world, reaching even remote communities. On the other hand, the local must adapt to new influences and find its own balance between preserving traditional life-worlds and modernity. Individuals are still linked to local societies, but they are affected by changes and are influenced by flows at the global level. Furthermore, the local space where cultural meaning construction is deterritorialized and social groups can possibly relate to each other less and less by a common local history or kinship. This new interdependence process between the local and the global opens the door to a myriad of potential reactions and resistances at the local level. Local processes, values, norms and social relations are now reshaped, renewed, reproduced or readdressed by incorporating global conditions and interactions: “As the two interact, the local influences the global and the global influences the local. The local is universalized and the universal is localized.” (Iyall Smith 2008: 3–4)<sup>6</sup>

### **2.3 Hybrid Identity**

The hybrid identity is the product of the negotiation between the global and the local. It is the fusion of distinct cultural practices, creating new meanings. Globalization is experienced locally and each place encounters global flows in its own way. Local community entities around the world enter into negotiation with daily local actions and

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<sup>6</sup> I deliberately do not develop on the question: Is there a global culture? Which I believe would not bring much to my thesis.

interactions of foreign penetrating ideologies, images, influences and ideas. We must emphasise here the notion of dialogue that transforms local culture. We cannot consider local cultural groups as being passive, uncritical or taken over by the flows of Western influence. Local groups play an active and creative role in the transformation of their own culture when dealing with inflowing cultural elements. The local handling of these elements is not an imitation or reproduction of foreign cultural practices but a participating dialogue with the global affecting cultural reproduction. The result is more cultural diversity:

The local clash of different cultural elements signifies a creation of new cultural forms, new lifestyles, new representations. In a global perspective, this means a global cultural diversity: but a diversity resulting from the present global cultural links, from the cultural appropriation of external elements by local populations and from the creative mixture of “global” elements with local meanings and cultural forms. (Schuerkens 2004: 23)

The “local clash” presented here should be explained firstly as a “clash of cultures” and then, secondly, as a stimulator of cultural diversity.

A culture clash happens in “the local” when global flows are interpreted as an attack to the stability and continuity of society. The extent and pace of the changes may create collective anxieties and fears among certain elements of society fighting to maintain their particular customs and social structures, if not their position of power (Raiskin 2008: 21). For example, nationalist and racist movements could be a manifestation of an emerging response from globalization. Again, religious extremism or fundamentalism could arise from groups that believe the Western culture flows opens the door to sexual permissiveness and devalues family (Levitt 2011: 177). Frighteningly for some, the “larger world” is evidently inviting itself in the household and impacts the very heart of a family dynamic.

Even in the field of the family, which is one of the most important places of cultural reproduction and transmission of traditions, external influences appear due to processes of globalization: a transgenerational continuity of attitudes, representations and desires is thus more and more undermined. (Schuerkens 2004: 21)

The potential response to global flows is conditioned by a variety of local political, economic and cultural constraints: cultural pervasiveness, history, political structures and leadership, pressure groups, cultural homogeneity and diversity, available technology, economic development, education levels to name a few (Lewellen 2002: 193). The response is also an intricate intermixture of cultural adaptation at different levels of traditionalism and modernism. Cultures as much as the individual can be selective and adopt what is seen as useful and desirable in a foreign influence. Even within the adopted foreign traits, practices will be altered differently, “Cultures are as capable of compartmentalization as of hybridity” (Brumann 1998: 501).

The “local clash” we saw earlier is stimulating diversity. Introducing a new concept, the “hybridity” or the “hybrid identity”:

Hybridity has become one way to re-create and re-vision a local community, while incorporating elements of outside groups, such as the global culture. The hybrid allows for the perpetuation of the local in the context of the global – using the global selectively while continuing essential elements of the local. (Iyall Smith 2008: 5–6).

By negotiating and integrating elements of the global and the local, the newly created identity is distinct from both the local and the global one. Since the local interacts in its own way with the global, the hybrid identity can take various forms and results in a greater differentiation of cultural manifestations, a proliferation of asserted differences (Schuerkens 2004: 21) and ultimately an intensification of local particularism on a worldwide scale.

While bringing an unfamiliar dynamic in the local life-worlds, globalization challenges the concept of culture and identity. In the past, an individual could claim a sense of belonging to a cultural group where biological race, language, common history, kinship and religion were enough of a territorially circumscribed marker of an ethnicity and of the identity. Culture was “considered something that differentiated one group from another, an identification of otherness [...]. [...] [O]ne of anthropology’s primary categories of enclosure” (Lewellen 2002: 50). Individual sense of identity was inevitably deeply if not almost exclusively shaped by the local culture (and other key elements such as gender) and it did locate one either inside or outside of a specific group. Identities were more determined and fixed by the community, segmented by ethnic, occupational and gender group belongings. Consequently, as we will see, concepts of culture and identity were easier to classify into categories and structures before the globalization. Historically,

[...] identity did not really come to the fore until the anthropological self-questioning of the late 1970s and 1980s, when postmodernism shifted attention away from supposedly objective structures and facts to the subjective experience of the people being studied. Rendering a voice to the subaltern and learning to decipher marginal discourses often meant, in practice, paying attention to the multitude of ways that people belong, or do not belong, to groups. (Lewellen 2002: 92)

With less defined cultural boundaries in a globalizing world, the concept of identity shifts to a more abstract and amorphous one. Identity became a “term to represent not a thing, but a ‘process’ or a ‘relationship’” (Lewellen 2002: 104). Stuart Hall (1990), one of the most important scholars in identity theory presents the same evolution:

Identity is not an accomplished end point of a people’s history, but a constant process of becoming. It is never complete, but always temporarily positioned

within a particular context that needs to be imaginatively and adaptively interpreted. (quoted in Lewellen 2002: 90)

Schuerkens (2004: 15) pointed out that “[...] until relatively recently, much of the world remained in a quasi-segmental state, in which many large enclaves of traditionalism persisted.” This idea that traditional cultural values based on kinship and the community both losing their central influence is crucial to the understanding of the new dynamic in the identity construction process. Global influences can now have a direct impact on an individual’s identity. With modernity, social constructions, social relations and peoples’ experiences become intrinsic components of cultural identities and they are simultaneously shaped and influenced by local and global forces (Lewellen 2002: 35). Since cultures enter into a new form of interdependence, influencing each other, exchanging new images, values, and norms, many alternative ways of life or alternative ways to see the world become possible for the individual. The bedrock of identity construction, the traditional local life-worlds is seriously questioned if not dissolved by the outside influences. (Lewellen 2002: 35)

Once individuals decide they have the right to be different and to amalgamate traditional, non-traditional and global elements, their identity becomes impossible to circumscribe into narrow categories. With modernity, each individual mixes heterogeneous cultural forms, recombines and integrates desired elements in a complex way. As a hybrid identity, individuals “occupying a hybrid space simultaneously experience [...] a cultural intermixture” (Gilroy 1993) where different cultural norms and practices can be used depending on the context. Identities are

[...] less likely to be fixed, authentic, and simple, as in the essentialist conception that once prevailed. Rather, identity becomes more fragmented and fluid, in a relational dialogue with others. We now have a multiplicity of identities based on nationality, age, gender, sexual orientation, type of work, place of residence, and so on. In short, our social relations are hybrids, no longer pure, and our identities may also be conceived of in that same way. We may well refuse binary

oppositions — colonizer or colonized, male or female, urban or rural — and instead take up liminal positions, that is to say, “betwixt and between” fixed poles. (Munck 2005: 13)

As mentioned earlier, globalization forces us to rethink some concepts of the social sciences: “The easy categories of the past seem oddly out of place in a world that is fragmented and in which space and time have imploded” (Lewellen 2002: 3). I would add to this the resulting fragmentation of identities. Modern individuals can now question who they are, challenge the established order, contest the unequal gender dynamic for example, make personal choices and take a stand on the issues they value. They can decide their own affiliations to certain groups on a global scale. With the help of mass media, migration and tourism, it is possible for individuals to envision their lives according to a myriad of possible *modi vivendi*, to identify themselves with practices foreign to their local origins. Couchsurfing is a foreign practice in the countries of the women I interviewed in this study. According to Arjun Appadurai, “it is in the imagination of individuals [that the] full impact of globalization is most acutely experienced” (Lewellen 2002: 95). The capacity of people to construct fantasies and imagine realities that are different from the traditional local ones brings the possibility to construct a different identity. In other words, reflexivity enables people, individually or collectively, to articulate identities (Langman 2004: 28). Identities are still shaped by local influences, but also by individual choices, personal interests and global influences from the constantly changing imagery that each individual embodies.

#### **2.4 Reflexivity, Agency and Forms of Capital**

In the past, the realm of “collective imagination” which was imposing itself on the group was conceived and transformed by the wise men, the elders, the elite, the shaman or the scholars (Müller 2004: 139). Today, this capacity of creating one’s own imagination is part of everyone’s daily being. Mass media creates new scripts for possible lives and possible futures. The limits of what can be conceived, of what is possible, have been enormously extended (Lewellen 2002: 96). In such a fragmented

society, individuals must determine choices that orient their lives, they must develop critical consciousness and by doing so, will influence the course of their lives. “It creates individuals who live out, biographically, the complexity and diversity of the social relations which surround them” (Skeggs 2004: 81). Individuals are increasingly forced to make choices, to reflect on their actions and consequently, to create their own self (Giddens 1991: 54), as described here by Giddens (1991).

What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity — and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour. (Giddens 1991: 70)

This identity theory of the reflexive self was widely developed by Anthony Giddens. The individual “must find her or his identity amid the strategies and options provided by abstract systems” (Giddens 1990: 124). According to Giddens, “human agents have the capacity to understand the contexts in which they move and also know what they do while they do it; they can deploy power to “act otherwise” and intervene in the social structure” (Giddens 1984: 14).

This opens the door to the idea that “[b]ecause people act on what they think, imagination has emerged as a form of social practice, a type of agency” (Lewellen 2002: 97).

The hybrid individual introduced earlier is a self-constructed identity influenced by multiple global cultural repertoires. In a global world where traditional power structures and relations are questioned, occupying a hybrid space can bring agency (Levitt 2011: 180) or advantages as presented by Iyall Smith (2008).

The ability to negotiate across barriers – language, cultural, spiritual, racial, and physical – is an asset. Although the hybrid contains elements of the local and the global, the intermixture makes it unique. Those who occupy hybrid spaces benefit from having an understanding of both local knowledge and global



cosmopolitanism. Those who can easily cross barriers in a world of amorphous borders have an advantage. (Iyall Smith 2008: 4)

The idea that negotiating across barriers brings an advantage is related to the definition of “cultural capital”, a concept developed by Bourdieu:

[...]the education, knowledge, know-how, and connections available to any individual or group that give them a “head start”, confer status, and can assist in the pursuit of power. (Chandler and Munday 2011)

In today’s world, cultural capital can be acquired through knowledge from a multitude of sources. Reflexive individuals can choose on a global scale according to their interests what they want to learn and where they get information from.

One source for this information is the different networks an individual is connected to. Cultural capital is closely connected to social capital in that sense. Ronald S. Burt puts it this way:

Social capital explains how people do better because they are somehow better connected with other people. Certain people are connected to certain others, trusting certain others, obligated to support certain others, dependent on exchange with certain others. One’s position in the structure of these exchanges can be an asset in its own right. That asset is social capital, in essence [...]. (Burt 2005: 4)

Social capital does not have a well defined, acknowledged definition. There are many debates on the sometimes contradicting definitions of social capital (Adler and Kwoon: 2002). This being said, Pierre Bourdieu defines it as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu 1986: 51). For Putnam, social capital is defined as “connections among individuals,

social networks, and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putman 2000: 19).

Burt (2005: 245) goes further with the idea of acquiring knowledge from different groups and making bridges between these groups: “[p]eople who have relations that span the structural holes between groups have a vision advantage in detecting and developing good ideas.” Their capacities to link different groups “bring these people [...] a premium in compensation, recognition, and responsibility” (Burt 2005: 245).

The notion of recognition acquired through the cultural capital and the social capital was also studied by Bourdieu and theorised as symbolic capital:

Symbolic capital refers to a reflected power gained or inherited by individuals through the accumulation and deployment of any form of capital whether economic, cultural or social. Symbolic capital is accrued through the specific form of capital being legitimated and valued by society. [...] Accordingly, symbolic capital is linked to power ascribed to the individual because of the legitimated nature of characteristic Couchsurfing within the social, economic and cultural capitals. Symbolic capital, or in other words reflected authority, is a key for the deployment of all other forms of capital. (Al Ariss: 2011: 1)

However, if “social capital [...] can create for individuals or groups an advantage in pursuing their ends” (Burt 2005: 5), there is clearly an element of willingness behind it. “This brings us to the issues of volition and intention: whether hybridity is self-asserted or ascribed will determine to a large degree its relation to agency” (Kraidy 2005: 152). In the past, in a traditional society (or even still today) at the village scale, everyday knowledge is/was relevant for agency (Müller 2004: 139). During colonial times, knowing the language of the colonizer to access economic or political power was crucial. In a globalizing world where multicultural society is inevitable if not already prevalent, hybridity “strengthens the agency of those with the means to translate and name the world, while weakening the agency of other participants” (Kraidy 2005: 152). This capacity to construe the “globalization discursive domain” can become an

“emancipatory knowledge” (Munck 2005: 19), a meaningful asset for those who find the means to acquire it. “Exposure to global communication and culture plant the seeds for the formation of a hybrid culture” (Lewellen 2002: 5), but it is by deciding to be a member of different groups, collecting influences and knowledge, selecting when to use them that the hybrid individual can be reactionary and claim progressive changes, while accepting a subaltern position in other instances (Mittelman 2000: 168). According to Pieterse, hybridity is also a “cross-category process and a subversion of hierarchy” (Iyall Smith 2008: 5).

Emancipation and agency are also related to empowerment. “Empowerment is about individuals (and communities) gaining confidence and developing skills that enable them to gain more control over their lives” (Munck 2005: 163). In this post-traditional society, the reflexive individuals can develop their “critical consciousness to better transform the world around them” (Munck 2005: 163), be it socially, politically or economically. Self-reflexivity and hybridity culminate in “the ability to acquire control over material and nonmaterial resources” (Moser 1989: 1815). While making choices in life and influencing its direction, the modern hybrid individual has the potential to enhance the political and social experience of human beings, making them agents of their own destiny and of the evolution of their communities (Kaidry 2005: 161). “Imagination can create solidarities, provoke resistance, provide a basis for organization and action” (Lewellen 2002: 96). It also stimulates creativity.

Interestingly, this new empowered hybrid identity is accessible to new groups: “access to some aspects of the local and global apparatus producing and circulating images and ideas is increasingly available via the internet to nonelites” (Ferguson 2008: 340). With the support of new technologies, “[c]ultural identities and cultural difference are more and more experienced on an everyday level, as socially constructed, which means they become consciously accessible and extremely useful as power resources in the daily struggle for social advantages” (Berking 2004: 58). Consequently, we may observe

ever-new arising configurations in power dynamics of societies where new groups using new media aim to empower themselves.

### **3 COUCHSURFING IN A COUNTRY IN WHICH THE GENDER DIVIDE IS MORE RIGIDLY CONSTRUCTED THAN IN WESTERN COUNTRIES**

This chapter presents extracts from my interviews, which show how women from societies with a wider gender gap use Couchsurfing and how they can use it for various outcomes. I will first look at their motivations to participate in the community and show how they must adapt the practice of Couchsurfing to the local socio-cultural environment. Then, I will demonstrate that Couchsurfing can be a tool for constructing their hybrid identity and acquire various forms of capital which give these women more control over their lives and empower them domestically. Finally, Couchsurfing can also create space where they can experience new gender interactions, something my respondents expressed they cannot do in their own cultures.

#### **3.1 The motivations of my interviewees to participate in Couchsurfing**

I observed similar motivations as the ones described earlier in Bialski's research while conducting my interviews. To the question: "what are your motivations for participating in Couchsurfing", the answers related to "personal growth", "to learn", "to make new friends" all came out repeatedly. For example, here is what two of them answered:

My motivation is to meet people from different culture, from different countries and yeah, to share travel experiences or even life experiences and everything, culture, about politics everything yeah. I learned quite a lot. And that's, and the thing is that's what I am interested about so that's why I'm I really like to be part of this community. (I5: 103)

[...] I try to gather people to have you know, meet, meet local, local couchsurfing members, and then you know the friendship take on from there. You know? So, it's, it's, I don't have to give so much effort but it is such a good networking place with so much fun with Couchsurfing and I meet a lot of people and some of them have become real good friends. So I am always motivated to

stay on this network. [...] Because I have gained so much good experiences [...]. Yes, and I also think that it's [...] service to my own country because I am representing my country as well in some ways. That, okay if we are good, foreigners will have a good impression of the people and have a good experience and want to come back you know? Like that. So it is something like I, I call that as the motivation too. (I4: 78)

Even if my subjects come from countries with a wider gender gap, the motive behind the participation in the network seems to be the same as the one presented by Bialski. Nevertheless, we will see that the new knowledge they acquire as well as these new experiences that motivate their participation in Couchsurfing may mean different outcomes for the women from these societies with a wider gender gap.

### **3.2 Using Couchsurfing in a different environment**

The typical Couchsurfer presented by Bialski as well as my respondents may share the same motivations, but the environment where they welcome foreigners may vary greatly. As most of the participants in Bialski's study were from the West, the difficulties for them to host foreign men may not have been raised and may not exist. By interviewing women from more conservative countries interacting with foreign men in their localities, it rapidly became clear that the practice of Couchsurfing in these countries is one of socio-cultural, religious, legal and familial constraints. Consequently, some of the interviewees must deal with local public authorities. Others must find alternative solutions to welcome foreign men in their house if they wish to do so, while others may be forced to stop hosting if the family decides it is not appropriate.

These constraints are illustrations of what happens when the global meets the local as discussed in the previous theoretical part. As a global movement channelling new cultural flows, Couchsurfing brings a new practice: women hosting foreign men and guiding foreign men around the area. At the local level, this practice may be

inappropriate. In other words, a foreign idea or practice penetrates the local reality and clashes with the local rules, practices and standards of behaviour.

### **3.2.1 Local constraints to the practice of Couchsurfing: the issue of reputation**

To the question: “what do your neighbours, your parents, your friends think about Couchsurfing?”, my interviewee from Ethiopia indicates direct and harsh judgements expressed to her by neighbours:

Like I was in Addis [Addis Ababa] and in Addis like the social thing is so difficult, [...] some of them they tell me like a straight for me. It is so crazy, sometimes they talk that I get money that I collect money from the travellers. And then they feel like I’m a bitch, where I can get just like guys, it is just like that crazy. So, I feel, I don’t feel that good [...] and I have been doing it. But the social aspect is really a bit tricky and difficult. [...] because, you know it’s a...from my culture it’s not easy. A lady alone and in a guy comes, in the house and then telling them that he is just the host? “ha hain?” [nodding with her head imitating a questioning and suspicious reaction].” (I1: 12)

These socio-cultural constraints exist in a corresponding way also in Indonesia, where my interviewee faces a similar dynamic that includes a religious limitation to hosting foreign men in her house.

If I am living alone I would accept only woman of course. Yeah, yeah, because I don't want to make my next door, my neighbours thinking negative of me because of the culture. Yeah, and also the religion. It's not allowed. [...] yes it's not allowed woman and man if both of them already adults and living together without married [...]. (I3: 58)

Another inharmonious cohabitation of Couchsurfing with the local reality was expressed by the interviewee from Morocco who must deal with legal considerations.

Officially, in order to protect tourists against fake guides, the Moroccan government restricts the interactions between foreigners and locals:

And then there is also something when you are a girl, not only the law says you are not allowed to hang out with foreigners unless you have a permit but also you're not allowed to host someone at your house. (I2: 25)

Underneath these socio-cultural limitations, lies the idea of leaving oneself exposed to the risk of a bad reputation within the community or the neighbourhood. My interviewee from Malaysia shared an apartment at the time of the interview, but she believed this idea of reputation could force her to stop. Even the extended family could intervene:

I think probably it would be different in (\*123\*) because I have my extended family around there and yet I think it would be different but, but normally I don't really care about, about that but I think it is, it's, it's my family, I mean my family is still quite big about that. So, they don't really want people to talk about us or something like that so, it would be my parents who will say like: "hey, you just stop you know doing Couchsurfing" or whatever you know that kind. It could be my parents yeah. (I5: 108)

The same issues related to family honour were relevant to my interviewee who does not live with her parents in Morocco. Furthermore, she admitted that the reputation issue could severely impact her future as it jeopardizes the possibility to marry.

My parents maybe they would prefer that I don't host foreigners, because it is a very bad reputation for a girl in Morocco. In fact, you will never get married if you have had all those guys at your house and all of those (laughing). [...] Because I mean it's a man society so it's like the whole reputation is on you. (I2: 33)



The women I interviewed from these countries in which gender constraints are clearly defined all perceived and expressed restrictions to a completely unfettered participation in Couchsurfing. Ultimately, the motivations to participate in Couchsurfing may seem similar, but the environment where it happens alters the way hosting and spending time with foreigners takes place in reality.

Because of the conservative environment and the socio-cultural constraints, the practice of Couchsurfing is undoubtedly different from what is experienced by most Western women participating in Couchsurfing in their Western environment. Therefore, as we saw earlier in the theoretical part, this demonstrates how global practices are adapted by women to local practices.

### **3.2.2 Responses and strategies used against the constraints to the practice of Couchsurfing**

My interviewees react differently to these constraints. The local environment forces them to either find ways to accommodate the practice of Couchsurfing to make it possible and acceptable or to fight against the limitations or at least disregard them. My interviewees from Indonesia, Iran and Bangladesh are using the approach of “adapting Couchsurfing practices to the local reality” while the Moroccan and Ethiopian woman usually defy authority or others who may judge them, being ready to cope with the consequences of their own less socio-culturally acceptable behaviours. These are manifestations of how the global meets the local.

To be able to host a foreign man, the Indonesian interviewee’s pragmatic solution was to make sure she is not alone at home with a foreign man: “If, if I want to help him, I will ask my cousin or my family members to stay with us” (I3: 58). She also introduces her Couchsurfing hosts to the neighbours as “a friend that she is helping” (I3: 58) and

she explains what Couchsurfing is. It seems that by being open and honest about having a male guest at home she avoids questions or gossip from the neighbours. If she cannot find a third party to be home with her and the surfer, she would ask other members of the Couchsurfing network to host the visitor. She also once gave her sister's house, because it was empty. "[H]e stayed alone at the house, so it's not with me. Not the same with me staying in my house. So we separate. We're living separate" (I3: 53).

Both interviewees from Iran and Bangladesh use a similar approach to negotiate the situation in their surroundings. Both are honest with their mothers and neighbours about what Couchsurfing is and how you can trust the system. Not many restrictions were clearly expressed from the Iranian women except the lack of general freedom: "[...] for me because I'm in Iran and I have limited you know, I am very limited in Iran. I am not very free" (I6: 122). After answering questions from her neighbours about "how you can trust?" the Couchsurfing system, "I usually explain what is it" (I6: 124). Then:

[...] my friend and family, some of my friend, after they saw my, you know my surfers, they decided to be a member of Couchsurfing and some of them now are couchsurfers. [...] So, I have just one neighbour in my apartment and she is also a couchsurfer after she met people from Czech, she said: "I want to be a member of Couchsurfing" (laughing). (I6: 124)

Contrary to the Iranian women I interviewed, my participant from Bangladesh does not host foreign men in her house, but she spends days guiding them in her city and sometimes travels with small groups of foreigners within the country. She invites them home for tea and dinner to introduce them to her mother. To be allowed to participate in Couchsurfing, she chooses to be honest with her mother and her family:

I have been very very lucky and I think yet as I said, I, I, I don't leave, I tell everything. I bring people over to show that okay this is the person I was hanging out for three days, I was showing her around and then you know I show

that okay and then my mom says hi, hello... [...] Men, women, no problem yeah yeah yeah it's fine. Because I think she learned to trust me over the years. (I4: 81)

She does the same with her relatives:

And then, relatives nowadays know about it because I, I used to post photos of our hang out and things like that so my relatives on Facebook now see that. Oh! they ask me about it sometimes it and I explained this is how it happens, this is what happens and they are like: "okay that's nice" they are not too judgemental thankfully. Yeah, I haven't faced much negative reaction from people around me. (I4: 81)

She confirms that "most girls in my city you know cannot do all these things" (I4: 82) and she agrees that she can participate in Couchsurfing because her mom is "very open to it thankfully, she is very liberal in that sense that she lets me go hang out with white, black, everybody else. Everybody, no problem" (I4: 81). She did face some issues while travelling with foreigners, notably to rent a hotel room or on a taxi, but "it should not stop, it should not stop you doing what you do" (I4: 86). Her experience is overall positive even if "people in Bangladesh are very curious" (I4: 85). The strategy to be open about this activity and receiving her mother's approval may be the right one for her as it prevents creating gossip that could be detrimental to her.

Finding ways to adapt the practice of Couchsurfing to the local reality relates to what was previously presented by Iyall Smith (2008: 3–4) where "the local influences the global and the global influences the local. The local is universalized and the universal is localized." The dialogue between the global and the local practice in Couchsurfing manifests itself in the adaptation of the practice that can make it acceptable locally and keep the women from being stigmatized. The Couchsurfing practice, the global idea, is adapted and can still exist.

At the other end, some of my respondents at times decide to confront the local rules and at other times adapt their practice to the local environment. As we saw earlier, my Moroccan interviewee must deal with a legal aspect that forces her to apply for a permit in order to host or travel with foreigners. According to her, it makes the experience less enjoyable if she does not get the permit:

[...] for the locals, it is a bit less fun, because you have to watch out, you have to think “ok, what if I meet a policeman” blablabla...so you are never very comfortable, comfortable and and travelling with another traveller or hosting another traveller. (I2: 26)

She applied for such a permit at the beginning of her Couchsurfing experience. While being in her mid-thirties at the time, she found it ridiculous that she was asked by the police if her father knew about her hosting a foreigner in her house. She needed to submit a written permission from her father to get the permit. She felt she was treated “like a child” (I2: 25). Meanwhile, not dealing properly with the local authorities makes her Couchsurfing experience stressful:

[...] now I can handle situations. But, it is, you feel a lot less comfortable and then yeah, you never know after. But then the thing is [eehh...] that you cannot... like stay at your house and close your door. Because of all those things. You have to fight with those things. I only have to live with the system and find a way in the system. (I2: 25)

Today, she hosts regularly and does not ask for a permit. She is taking a risk: “It’s inhuman. Yes, you never know, the police comes on the weekend and you’re alone and they start making you trouble” (I2: 26). To the contrary, when she travels with men in the country, she does not take the same risk:

And then I have been also traveling in Morocco with many people. And when I travel I always take a permit. Because in my city I mean I know how it is but when I travel I always ask for it. Especially if it's a guy. When it's a girl, when I'm traveling with a girl I don't. Because they can be very I mean when you are traveling with a guy, they harass you and then they want...it is just corruption, they want money out of you. Yes but then when you're traveling with girls, it's okay. (I2: 26)

With time, her attitude changed and she found ways to deal with the situation. "When I was younger, it was very hard. I used to get very angry. [...] But now, [...] I think I start to just ignore it" (I2: 34). However, in fact, her knowledge of the environment and her experience help her to find "spaces" where she can act more freely. Her neighbourhood for example makes it possible to continue hosting without a permit:

[...] if I was living as a girl in a popular neighbourhood it would be almost impossible. Because neighbours can call the police. Because a girl, it's like the whole neighbourhood have an eye on the girl who is living alone. (I2: 33)

She lives in a "neighbourhood with students, foreigners, so it's like kind of different kind of different category. Which makes Couchsurfing and hosting travellers easy and accepted. And then also, I don't have very strong contacts with my neighbours" (I2: 33). She also admits it is easier because she lives alone and "that's not common for a Moroccan girl" (I2: 27) and she does not need "to explain things to someone" (I2: 34) or to "justify" (I2: 34) to her father. She has a personal freedom but also some "spaces" where a more global or liberal mind-set and reality is possible and where she can ignore the rules. Nevertheless, in her city other "spaces" are different:

[...] I made a few decisions like I stopped like for instance walking in some places like in some tourist attraction and some places, I wouldn't walk to with the traveller because because when I get to get the whole time kind of verbally harassed. Yes there are few places that I just avoid, which I avoid. Because of it. And then now I am I don't know. Now it is easier. Now I learned just ignore.

But it's still frustrating because you don't want things to be like this but that's how it is. (I2: 34)

Officially, this Moroccan legal procedure to obtain a permit is to protect foreigners against badly intentioned unauthorised tour guides. In spite of this, she negotiates rules and behaviours depending on the circumstances and her knowledge of the environment. She creates "spaces" where she somehow feels disengaged from the local constraints. This is another example of how the global and the local can be negotiated. As discussed earlier in the theoretical part, the global and the local are interdependent processes which create a myriad of potential reactions and resistances at the local level.

My interviewee from Ethiopia is also intentionally ignoring what people may think: "[a]nd whenever you are with white people, like you are an African, [...] they think that you are doing something for money you know what I mean? There is a kind of attitude that you can see from the people. So it is not nice" (I1: 8). She strongly claims that "Yes I ignore it. This is my life" (I1: 11). But at the same time, she confesses that, "it's not nice" (I1: 8). Somehow, she must live with the stigma to be pointed at and seen as a "bitch" [as she mentioned earlier] or as taking advantage of the foreigners. Contrary to the situation in Morocco where the police could arbitrarily interfere with the practice of Couchsurfing, and where one can face legal consequences, the Ethiopian respondent does not raise that issue. "Actually it's so peaceful. And the people are very friendly" (I1: 11). Nevertheless, when I asked her if she feels like people are judging her, she replied: "Yes, 150%" (I1: 8).

My interviewee from Malaysia had experienced Couchsurfing in various countries, both hosting and surfing. Her capacity to host is limited when in non-Western countries and she has not done it much yet now that she lives in Asia. To the question on how she deals with people judging her, she answers:

I would not care less because I know that I don't, I don't do bad things basically. I don't, I don't do anything that, that, that cross my, I don't know, my culture or religion or whatever, so...I don't really care. (I5: 108)

She does not care because she is convinced she is not doing anything against her cultural values and religious principles. At the same time, she is aware of the fact she must be careful about hosting in Malaysia. She is capable to host in Malaysia because she “live[s] in apartment so, [where] it's not really that obvious” (I5: 108) that foreigners are coming in and out, but would it be different if her entrance door was more public? As we saw earlier, she would stop hosting if her family would ask her and in fact she doesn't “really talk to them actually about it” (I5: 106). She claims not to care about what others may think, but in reality she hosts where few people can notice. For example, she recently moved into an apartment with another girl and they have enough space, but she has not hosted foreign men there yet. If the “housemate is out of the town and yeah, so I can, I can actually use this living room and yeah, I would love to just host anyone basically [...] as long as they have good references and everything I might” (I5: 100). She has not opened the subject with her roommate and it seems she would host without her being there.

Deciding to host foreigner men through Couchsurfing in a society with a strict gender system means that the participants must deal with socio-cultural constraints where the authorities, the religion, or the ascendancy of men over a women still impose ways to behave even when the latter is an adult. The reality verbalized by my interviewee who needs her father's permission is a good illustration of the local traditional rules, (the father having legal authority over his daughter until she is married) meeting the global influence where women can freely welcome a foreign men without raising suspicion. Mobility and technology question existing rules and power relations, bring conflicting behaviour in localities where they are less accepted compared to where Couchsurfing was conceived and launched. Most of the interviewees are consequently forced to just ignore the judgements of their neighbours, act illegally in certain cases or find alternative culturally acceptable solutions to host the foreign men. In the end, hosting in

a more conservative environment is more complex than it could be in Western countries and may affect their future lives.

The women I selected must deal with socio-cultural realities most probably unknown by other women members of Couchsurfing from less gender unequal societies. It is obvious that many factors must be considered when analysing their situations and it is difficult to generalize. Furthermore, each woman has a personal situation, a certain degree of individual freedom, different values and beliefs that affect her decision in regards to the way she negotiates and interacts with foreign men in her locality. Nevertheless, what comes out of the above examples is that the practice of Couchsurfing must be adapted to the local environment and is a good illustration of the global meeting the local and both adapting to each other as we saw earlier in the theoretical part.

### **3.3 Couchsurfing in a conservative context: using Couchsurfing for different outcomes**

Pointing out at the difficulties encountered by the study's respondents, the question of their motivations naturally arises. Why participate in Couchsurfing if it makes life more difficult, if it affects one's reputation and jeopardizes one's future? For the Moroccan interviewee, "[...] the thing is what I learned out of it is beyond what my surrounding think and tell me" (I2: 33). I pushed the interrogation further with some of my interviewees to understand what is beyond, why is "making new foreign friends" so important. Why acquiring knowledge supersedes the potential troubles they may encounter. The outcomes behind the motivations do not appear at first as they are not seen as such, but the Indonesian interviewee puts it in these words: "Based on my experience in yeah, based on my experience from the Couchsurfing, my life is more powerful" (I3: 61).



This assertion opened the door to the idea of looking at the conducted interviews under the prism of empowerment, where Couchsurfing can potentially be used by its members to empower themselves in certain countries.

In the next chapters, I will argue that according to the data I collected, in countries where the gender disparity is wider, Couchsurfing is used by women to construct a hybrid identity but also for three other purposes: first, they use Couchsurfing to gain social, cultural and symbolic capital within their society. Second, they use Couchsurfing to open doors to more opportunities where they can create “space” for more freedom and to empower themselves. Third, they use Couchsurfing to experience new power dynamics between genders.

### **3.3.1 Using Couchsurfing to gain social, cultural and symbolic capital locally**

Considering their limited financial resources, a majority of the interviewees do not travel abroad frequently. Consequently, they mainly use the Couchsurfing network in their country of residence to welcome foreigners, to guide them around their locality or to attend various gatherings regrouping locals and travellers. This participation in a global network “physically” happens for them at the local level and impacts the interviewees in their social relations in their locality.

This global phenomenon that is Couchsurfing also brings the interviewees to meet with other locals (not only foreigners) and create a new circle of friends from their country, in other words, a new network. This new network of other like-minded people becomes another “space” where they gain social capital, a concept presented earlier in the theoretical part which can be summarised as: “[...] a basis for social solidarity and [...] a collective resource that makes trust possible, acquire more knowledge, self-confidence

and resources” (Chandler and Munday 2011). My interviewee from Bangladesh presents how her local participation in Couchsurfing affects her:

It does affect my life, very positively. [...] Because it is more positive and I have learned so much. [...] I have had good times you know, I can socialize with the network that I have and then it is really fun. So, social life. It has given me social life, some good friends and other than that I think these friend’s help. They have my back. They help me out and the people in my network I can ask them and then some of them help me look for jobs and things like that. So they are very useful in that way. (I4: 79)

Being involved in the network in general and adopting new friends locally brings her other benefits such as “learning from other people’s mistakes” (I4: 79) and at the same time getting to know yourself. She remarked that participating in the network made her more mature and helped her develop new skills:

I do really well, that you know managing people and then coordinating with the guiding, the city guides or something like that. [...] So I think if you ask to my friends in the network they would say that I am a very very good planner also an integral central point within the network. I think that’s how they think of me. So it’s my, my managing skills I think, that, it has improved probably. (I4: 79)

This reaches a more individualistic approach to the notion of social capital where my participants “invest in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace” (Lin : 2001: 19). The expected returns of participating locally in Couchsurfing can also be seen as empowerment: “participation in associational life is thought to generate individual rewards, such as career opportunities and support networks, as well as community goods, by fostering the capacity of people to work together on local problems” (Norris and Inglehart 2003: 2).

Parallel to that local social capital, all my interviewees claim they participate in the network to learn. They develop themselves by acquiring knowledge and skills through the encounters they make in Couchsurfing:

I believe that with Couchsurfing you get to meet travellers first if you can't travel the world, they can come and you can bring travellers to your place and then you get to know their countries and then their stories, and then the way they see the world. And then if you manage to travel then you go to other people and then you realize there are other people, not only you in the world. (Laughing) And then yes, with different beliefs, different visions of the world, with the different skin colours for instance, and then yes, it is, you stop thinking only about your own country and your belief and your people. You realize ah! there are other people living with you in the world and then you get to talk to these people and communicate with them. (I2: 35 —36)

This kind of “global knowledge” presented here could be interpreted as “cultural capital”: “the education, knowledge, know-how, and connections available to any individual or group that give them a “head start”, confer status, and can assist in the pursuit of power” (Chandler and Munday 2011). Using Couchsurfing to acquire this global knowledge, these “different visions of the world” as she says is a way to develop a hybrid identity. Couchsurfing brings the participants new interactions with new knowledge from which to choose from. While stopping to think only about your country and your people, you start thinking differently, including ideas that are brought from outside. This respondent expresses here collecting new information from which she develops a different identity than the one coming from her immediate surroundings. This is a hybrid identity, as we saw earlier in the theoretical part, while also gaining cultural capital.

I introduced already in the theoretical part the idea that hybridity “strengthens the agency of those with the means to translate and name the world” (Kraidy 2005: 152), and that the capacity to construe the “globalization discursive domain” can become an “emancipatory knowledge” (Munck 2005: 19), a meaningful asset for those who find

the means to acquire it. This later extract from my Moroccan participant shows us a woman who acquired knowledge about the world through Couchsurfing. This knowledge is a form of cultural capital she can use back in her society. As a woman in a society with a strict gender system, this knowledge, this understanding of the world can potentially be useful to act with more awareness and resources to change her society towards more equality notably. This knowledge of the world that few women may have in her society can be used as agency. She declares that “Couchsurfing is participating in changing mentality at least it's kind of a development” (I2: 35). To my question: Has Couchsurfing changed something in the way you see it, the man and woman relations?, she replied:

I think maybe it helps, it helps to be stronger but you already have things I think in your personality. And the age and what's around you and experiences even make it stronger or I guess. So it made it stronger. (I2: 34)

It made her stronger in front of men or in general and I would argue that this attitude or capacity combined by the fact she reached a certain understanding of the world is a hybrid identity and could potentially place her in a different hierarchical position among her peers. In a society where women undergo less opportunity than men, the Moroccan interviewee's perspective should be understood as having cultural capital, a capital that could bring her a certain authority at the local level. In such conservative societies, a young woman who travels alone around the world would project the image of a liberated woman. She would be seen as “different”, having knowledge and freedom and would acquire a certain status among a number of people around her. As we saw earlier in the theory part, this sort of prestige or recognition is also another form of capital: the symbolic capital.

The interviewees also acquire symbolic capital by inviting foreigners to their place and spread the positive outcomes of having foreigners in their homes. For example, by welcoming foreigners and including them within their local network, they give the chance to their family members, friends and neighbours to improve their language skills

in English, which is a valuable asset in today's globalized world that can open doors to better work opportunities for instance. What we observe here is that being a member of Couchsurfing helps the interviewees to gain cultural capital. It is manifested here through the knowledge they have that builds bridges between the global world and their local community. By doing so, their "(s)ymbolic capital is accrued through the specific form of capital being legitimated and valued by society" (Al Ariss : 2011: 1). This was expressed by my interviewee from Indonesia:

Positive. Yes because they also get new friends from me, from that friend and also practice their English [laughing] and they also have what experience from the information, sharing information with my friends from the Couchsurfing. Yes. So, as long as joining Couchsurfing my people around me is positive thinking about that. Because they didn't get negative of that. [...] Because it's not much tourist there. So when, yeah, when the people from other country came to (\*123\*), so they were excited and want to really want to talk with them. [...] Actually, they really want. (I3: 65)

The participation in Couchsurfing impacts the adjacent network of family, friends and neighbours. As stated earlier, as modern hybrid individuals, my interviewees have the potential to enhance the political and social experience of human beings, making them agents of their own destiny and of the evolution of their communities (Kraidy 2005: 161). The interviewee from Iran also believes she is making a difference in her community by hosting foreigners:

They can see oh! My God, it's not true, let's see what happens in the world. You are from from the world and especially our government doesn't let us know about the world so at least may be through Couchsurfing people start exchanging experience with other people around the world. And I'm sure it helps them. I know too many people I introduced them to Couchsurfing and they really changed. Really changed. And I'm very happy to do this. (I6: 126)

Couchsurfing gives her a position of a leader in her area where people trust her. "Because it comes from this site. People are trust me. They know that I know what to do. So, they say that: if she do it, it means that it is possible so I can do" (I6: 125). She

seems to inspire people in her locality and she brings knowledge and value and wins the esteem of her surroundings by doing so. She acquires symbolic capital.

On a larger scale, my interviewee from Indonesia wins symbolic capital by the economic impact she generates in her community. While hosting foreigners, she promotes her city. The couchsurfers will go back to their country and talk about her city. “Yes, promote my tourism place, so, so it helps the government also [...] to make increase the visa I mean the, the visa. The visa or the income” (I3: 63). She is aware that her involvement in Couchsurfing brings money to her government as foreigners pay for a visa to visit Indonesia, but also to the local shops or other tourist-oriented businesses. There is limited tourism in her area so she helps in her own way to improve the economic situation of her city. I would suggest that she wins symbolic capital notably in the eyes of the shop owners, as well as from other people who notice her repeatedly spending time with foreigners.

In countries or localities where tourists are rare, foreigners are easily noticed. The interviewee from Bangladesh is approached by strangers who want to know who she is and who the foreigners are:

[...] if I I’m with foreigners and then I’m leaving and then someone would ask me, approach me and say : “oh! so where did that person come from? How do you know that person? Which country?” [...] And as for, as for hanging out with foreigners, I think I have become, my friends, they think that I’m always with foreigners and if they see a group of foreigners, they look out for me and see if I am with them or not. Around the University you know? Showing them around. So it’s, I have been like a, it’s become a reputation for me that I am hanging out with white people. (I4: 85)

She is identified as the girl with the foreigners and according to her “it is more like a positive judgement” (I4: 85). I would argue that she wins symbolic capital here also. She is seen as a young woman with knowledge of the world and that has become part of her identity, a hybrid identity she has developed through her encounters with the

foreigners. She projects an image of herself that “stands out”, she attracts attention. Consequently more people may know who she is and that may be used as agency eventually. It may result in positive outcomes on a professional level in the future. This power of attraction was emphasised as well by my interviewee from Malaysia: “[...] it’s really cool to be around foreigners [...] I get a lot of attention from that” (I5: 107). Nevertheless, as noted previously, getting attention also stimulates judgement, stigmatisation and gossiping — a negative outcome that reduces their social capital in other circles.

Women from a society with a strict gender system can use Couchsurfing to increase their knowledge about the world, about themselves and understand their own society better. As a reflexive self, they can decide their own affiliations to certain groups on the global and on the local scale they can envision their lives according to a myriad of possibilities. They can identify themselves with practices foreign to their local origins and by doing so construct their hybrid identity. The collection of experiences, knowledge, competencies and skills they may get through Couchsurfing develop their hybrid identity and bring them cultural capital within their communities. Sharing that knowledge with their surroundings and making the global world accessible to them makes these women agents of change in their communities, putting them in a leading position within a society which is negotiating changes from inside the local versus global dialogue.

The same dynamic can be observed if these women stimulate the local economy with their global activities. They can acquire power and recognition. They can show an image of an active world citizen working for the improvement of their society both socially and economically. They use Couchsurfing to create a space where they may enjoy more freedom than other women while acquiring symbolic capital.

### 3.4 Couchsurfing used for empowerment

As discussed earlier in the theoretical part, “social capital is a person’s or group’s sympathy toward another person or group that may produce a potential benefit, advantage, and preferential treatment for another person or group of persons beyond that expected in an exchange relationship” (Robison, Schmid, and Siles 2002: 16). In Couchsurfing, this social capital becomes reality through a network of people from all over the world helping each other, which can be trusted and in return gives the possibility to, notably, travel at a lower cost. According to the data I collected, it seems that it is through the participation in this worldwide network of people accessible with Couchsurfing that they acquire new experiences and new knowledge to become empowered.

Since the interviewees who participated in this research come from poorer countries, the required finances are considerable if they ever dream to travel even for one day. For them, Couchsurfing can open a door to the world. This active participation in a network where they gain social capital helps them to acquire experiences and knowledge that will result in opening up the realm of possibilities in their life. At the same time, the constantly repeated assertion that they are participating in Couchsurfing because it brings knowledge indicates a development of their hybridity and acquiring cultural capital. Couchsurfing is used here for the resources and the potential benefits it gives them access to.

The interviewee from Morocco relates how Couchsurfing opened the doors of more freedom to her:

And we don’t backpack in our culture. [...] So, actually I’d never discovered travelling or I’d never thought I could afford traveling before I discovered Couchsurfing. So [...] I talk to the people who just started telling me stories about like tips, about ways to travel about ways to make it very cheap [...] So it



really helped me like before I travel [...] to (\*123\*) I bought my Lonely Planet<sup>7</sup>, I bought my first backpack and then got some stuff [...] like the clothes I had to take with me and then just took the flight because we don't, I repeat again, we don't travel like this. It means, of course, traveling then we go with an agency for a week or two. So [...] everybody thought: "this is just crazy what you're doing". And I had great great fun and then I realized I would like to do this more and more. The only thing I regret is I didn't discover Couchsurfing in my 20s'. (I2: 28)

While hosting in Morocco, she developed social capital within the Couchsurfing network. She built up her credentials and learned how she can trust this system. At the same time, she collected relevant and useful information (knowledge) about how to travel abroad. The combination of social capital, trust, knowledge, security and affordability the network brings, gave her the confidence in her capacities to experience travelling abroad alone. While backpacking, "[...] I stayed with both guys and girls and, of course I stayed more with guys because there are more guys. And then it's also I guess natural [...]. [...] I prefer to travel alone because you are free and you can do whatever you want" (I2: 23), she says. She travelled alone and stayed with boys in different countries. Something "crazy", considered somehow out of the realm of possibilities for socio-cultural reasons. "[...] they say 'you should not risk' but it is just ridiculous not to risk" (I2: 29).

These selected extracts show us that Couchsurfing was used to acquire social capital, knowledge and faith in her capacity, taking risks, which paved the way to more individual freedom. Couchsurfing was used to create "space" for more freedom, notably to travel abroad. She lives in a country, as we saw earlier, where by law she can't officially interact extensively with foreigners. Couchsurfing gives her the chance to do so. In a country where culturally speaking or generally speaking, people and especially single women don't "travel like that" (I2: 28), as backpackers. Couchsurfing brings her new opportunities, resulting in more freedom and more control over her life, more agency. She took from her encounters with other backpackers influences on ways to see

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<sup>7</sup> Lonely Planet is a publishing house specialised in travel guidebooks.

the world and a new practice non- in her country. She is still Moroccan, but she has incorporated a new lifestyle that she chooses and which becomes part of her identity. She is constructing a hybrid identity and she is empowering herself.

The interviewee from Iran used Couchsurfing to improve her chances for a better future. As discussed earlier, she remarks that she is not free in her country and she initiated emigration procedure because she “cannot really tolerate this situation” (I6: 127). She had to go through an interview in a foreign language at the Embassy of her chosen country. She used Couchsurfing to meet foreigners that could help refine her language skills and to increase her chances of achieving her goal to emigrate. She gained social capital by participating in Couchsurfing and by doing so, she multiplied her network of people who could help her. She used Couchsurfing as an opportunity to acquire more knowledge and increase her chances to succeed by trying to improve her future life opportunities. Through Couchsurfing she had access to resources and a space where “you can have connections with the world” (I2: 126). According to her, “these are very important [...] in a country where our government doesn’t let us know about the world. So, at least maybe through Couchsurfing people start exchanging experience with other people around the world” (I6: 126). This is also the expression of a reflexive self. As Giddens writes it, she has the capacity to “understand the contexts” and she “deploys power to act-otherwise” (Giddens 1984: 14). She uses Couchsurfing to learn a new language and to develop her hybrid identity, to acquire cultural knowledge and gain more power over her own destiny, which can be understood as agency.

For the participant from Ethiopia, Couchsurfing inspired her to engage in a pan-African project. The realm of possibilities opened up to her after acquiring knowledge and multiplying encounters she had through Couchsurfing. With the social capital she acquired through Couchsurfing, she met travellers from around the world and she herself travelled in other African countries using Couchsurfing. This experience helped her to know herself better and “it just clear me up of what I really want to do with my life” (I1: 6).

I somehow I foregone my dreams into it. What I really want to do things like, it's amazing. I didn't know that I am that so sociable, I didn't know that I have those kinds of you know intercultural like feelings, but, once I become a part of it, I started feeling things that I feel about myself and it really helps me to understand myself, and what I really want to do. Because like the people you meet, are not like same kind of people because of, they are travellers they are not there don't have the same pattern. So, it just gives you millions of ideas. And you try to see yourself into every people that you meet. And, you know you can kind of it gives you a time to understand yourself and that's how it affects me. (I1: 5)

Couchsurfing inspired her to start a project to show the other Africans that travelling is also accessible to them: "Because for us, it seems like a big deal going somewhere" (I1: 19). With Couchsurfing, she gets the right information, the security and the possibility to travel at a reasonable cost. Based on her own travel and hosting experiences with Couchsurfing, coupled with the fact that she never received hosting requests from African travellers, she believes that she understands "what is really missing with us" (I1: 18) the Africans. She now has a dream and she sees what she wants to do: "I want the people to open up themselves and then see how the world is" (I1: 18).

Because of this Couchsurfing experience, I started a project and am processing the legalization here in Uganda, that's the reason why I am here. It's *Young African Traveler Initiative*. Which is going to give opportunities, because for, for young people to travel in Africa. Because I never get one couchsurfer from African countries. [...] Why we are we don't travel? [...] So, based on that concern, based on that objective, I am processing it and I hope within one month I get the legalization so that I will try to function and for initial phase, I am going to consider East Africa. (I1: 18)

According to her, thanks to Couchsurfing, her "life will never be the same again. [...] Because you add values to yourself" (I1: 19). She used Couchsurfing to acquire knowledge and new experiences to know herself better. But Couchsurfing was also used to know about the other Africans and that knowledge gave her a venture idea that could be meaningful to her and other people. Ultimately, that project could be economically viable for her. Travelling through Couchsurfing also broadens her "imagination" to see

things differently and give her new ideas that could have an impact on her life as an independent woman.

This particular interview illustrates a reflexive self who sees her context and decides to act and make choices as presented by Giddens (1984: 14) earlier. By travelling and hosting she developed a hybrid identity where “you see yourself into every people that you meet. And, you know you can kind of it gives you a time to understand yourself and that’s how it affects me” (I1: 5). Through inspiring intercultural encounters bringing new imageries (such as presented by Appadurai earlier), collecting information, making choices, acting to influence her life and the life of the other Africans she behaves like a reflexive self who developed an hybrid identity making bridge between her acquired knowledge and her local reality.

The examples above show how Couchsurfing could enlarge the spectrum of opportunities for these women from countries where they usually get much fewer chances than men. These opportunities were used to gain knowledge, self-confidence, skills and ultimately more power over the course of their lives. The following definition already stated in the theoretical part summarises how these three women are empowering themselves by using Couchsurfing: “Empowerment is about individuals [and communities] gaining confidence and developing skills that enable them to gain more control over their lives” (Munck 2005: 163).

### **3.5 Using Couchsurfing to experience new gender interactions**

As we already saw in previous interview excerpts, the interviewees themselves describe their societies as more segregated than most of Western societies. I would argue that most probably, this gender dynamic shapes the relation they experience between genders since their very early age, and it may reduce or prescribe the nature, the

deepness or quantity of exchanges they can hope with the other gender. As we saw earlier, couchsurfers are motivated by deep encounters that bring them knowledge and personal growth which is related to their identity construction.

The reflexive self finds its echo here in the need for the Couchsurfer for personal growth through dialogue with the other in order to discover one-self (Bialski 2007: 39). Paola Bialski's findings go further:

In order to achieve personal growth, the individual therefore embarks on a quest of emotional intensity and verbal intimacy by engaging in conversations with a multitude of like-minded individuals beyond one's local boundaries. There is a maximization of these intimate contacts, where a relationship of mutual learning is attempted with as many people as possible. The fact that the post-modern individual seeks to maximize his/her contacts directly means that intimacy does not always have to be accompanied by long lasting commitment. (Bialski 2007: 47)

This search of intimate encounters is also implied throughout the testimony of the interviewees in this study. Furthermore, if we put them under the analysis of a cross gender interaction, the gender barriers they grew up with do not seem to prevent them from searching for meaningful encounters with the other gender in Couchsurfing. That search crosses over "one's local boundaries" (Bialski 2007: 47), the local gender boundary they grew up with. In that sense, gender interaction can be redefined in Couchsurfing and that is what my interviewees are interested in experiencing.

In parallel, Bialski develops the idea that within Couchsurfing, the geographical location where the interaction happens between host and surfer does not matter:

Couchsurfing does not provide the sense of home for the traveller, yet it merges the local and the traveller into a completely new sphere – making them interact in a way that previously was not possible. (Bialski 2007: 29)

What we see here is a redefinition of the “local space” and the “local place”. Couchsurfing brings new paradigms to the notion of space within the tourism concept. I borrow the idea that the “created space” in Couchsurfing opens a door for a different interaction between people (or between realities). This “created space” for previously impossible interaction exists for my interviewees and is used to experience new gender dynamics; a new explorative “space” with different gender roles and gender dynamics for them.

Most of the interviewees would not host a man from their country and would not stay with a man if they travel within their own country. Most of them told me they cannot, because they do not trust the men from their country. Here is how the interviewee from Iran presents it:

I never do Couchsurfing in Iran to be honest with you. I never never never do it in my country. Too many people from other provinces of Teheran, Iran, they asked me to host them. Especially men. But I cannot trust them. (I6: 127)

She admitted not to have such restrictions when she travelled abroad, she couchsurfing with at least one man on her last trip. So, how can these women trust an unknown person from a totally different culture “met” on a website, but not trust someone from their own culture? Based on her knowledge of the men and women dynamic in certain countries, another interviewee explains what makes hosting and surfing impossible for her in certain parts of the world:

So, I know that Middle Eastern guys are really ahh, I don't know they are [sigh], because not all Middle eastern guys, but especially the ones in (\*123\*) because there are segregated. Their [...] society is segregated guys, I mean between male and female so when they see us, when the guys see us, it's like they never saw a woman before you know what I mean? So, [laughing] it's just not normal for us to mingle with the guys over there. So for example with, in (\*123\*) because they are quite conservative so I would not mingle with male that I don't know

for example or even the (\*123\*), with the locals, the local men because, because that's not how they do it and I would not even look at that eyes for example because I just, mmm... [...] it is just not polite because we are different, different sexes blablabla...it's quite strange. But yeah, that's how it is, [...] but then when I'm overseas, I would not act like that. (I5: 106)

To the contrary, she does believe she could surf (with) or host a man in Europe where she feels more comfortable to do so. “[A]s long as they have good references and everything I might” (I5: 100). And she adds up, “but somehow, in the Middle East I need to be careful with the guys” (I5: 102). The “space” that can be created with Couchsurfing is more comfortable for her in a different country where men and women are less segregated. She can use that “space” and “mingle” (I5: 102) with boys, then learn from them, something she cannot do in the same way in the Middle East. That new space is also a place where the global meets the local.

On a trip to Europe for a conference, one of the interviewees had accommodation organized for her during the event. Nevertheless, she did not use the hotel room provided and instead decided to couchsurf with two different hosts, before and after the conference. Both times, they were boys:

[...] so when I came back to (\*123\*), last few days I stayed over with Enzo<sup>8</sup>, and in the beginning, you know, I was staying with Paul<sup>9</sup> even though we had, we had accommodation given to us but then you know when we arrived in (\*123\*) me and another girl from Bangladesh we went, basically we had one accommodation but then you know we hang out with Paul the Couchsurfing friend who I was looking for when I was looking for accommodation and then we became friends and then we hang out, we stayed over at his place. We were cooking together and we watched a movie and stayed over. So, that was like an unintentional surfing at his house and then the next morning we took Paul to our other accommodation to meet with our other host. (I4: 124)

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<sup>8</sup> Name changed.

<sup>9</sup> Name changed.

She experiences segregation in her country where “there are a lot of people like you know they grew up separately and went [...] to school separately and then when they enter University they meet girls and they go crazy” (I4: 83). Under the light of this abstract about her journey in Europe, Couchsurfing was used to create a space to experience something new: Interacting with men from another culture while sharing activities with them, activities it may not be common to share with men in their country. Couchsurfing was used to create a space where another dynamic was possible with the other gender. It seems that because the host was from a different culture where gender relations are closer to equal, my interviewee was seeking such an experience where gender dynamics and roles become secondary and she can be herself, not confined by a certain role and thus feel freer. This is also the manifestation of a reflexive self that understands her context and chooses a space for herself.

As we saw earlier, my interviewee from Ethiopia hosts men in her apartment. According to her, there is a barrier between men and women in her country. But Couchsurfing is a platform that sets aside the differences between men and women because it is based on trust:

If you are with Couchsurfing I just trust you. It is a good platform that is brought for us, and when it comes to the man and woman, it is the same thing. Like it is just trust whether you are a man whether you are a woman what matters is the trust. And then that’s how it affects me you know? (...) I am not that like women and men and this is, this is...no no. (I1: 10)

She counts many experiences hosting foreign men. She finds a space in Couchsurfing where she can trust men, feel equal with them and exchange with them. Because of the trustful space she can create while using Couchsurfing, she feels safe and strong enough to share her one-room apartment with a man. I interpret this capability as agency from her side with respect to the other gender where even in her own country, in her own apartment, she can create that equal space between men and women.



My interviewee from Indonesia would also be capable to stay abroad with foreign men, but she cannot in her own country, as we saw earlier:

But of course I would select also. I send request, I will see how is the man. So, if I feel okay, I trust him. So I will stay with him. I will stay with him. There is no problem for me when in their country because their country is not really, other culture is not, yes, the culture allows it. Yeah, and people does not too much gossip. And here you get too much gossip [Laughing]. (I3: 65)

For her, the distance imposed between men and women exists in her country for cultural reasons. Nevertheless, she challenged the “border” and hugged a foreign man when he was leaving from her house “because the love [Laughing] maybe because the feeling” (I3: 71). Hugging is not part of the culture in Indonesia where she hugs her brothers only on special occasions such as birthdays. But through Couchsurfing she experienced feelings, a new proximity with the other gender. But she was “still under control” (I3: 71), and she still keeps her “idea that we should have the border for women and men before you get married of course” (I3: 71). What we observe here is a hybrid identity that mixes different cultural practices.

All my interviewees claim they participate in Couchsurfing to learn about the world, but also learn about themselves. For the women I interviewed, Couchsurfing can be used as a laboratory to discover more about interaction between men and women. I would argue that they are interested in experiencing an interaction with men that has for them less embedded gender and cultural dynamics. Couchsurfing can create a more neutral territory, a “space” with less gender and cultural imposed interaction; a “space” that does not dictate how they should behave just because they are women. I would argue that this experience is constructing a hybrid identity, incorporating practices or values that are different from their own native culture.

In this context, Couchsurfing could be seen as a catalyst of culture and gender interactions from which the members can develop a hybrid identity. It is a global network where new gender dynamics can be found as well as a space where new meanings of masculinity and femininity can be generated through the intercultural

encounter. As presented by Iyall Smith (2008) in *Studies in Critical Social Sciences: Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations*, Couchsurfing is a good example of a global phenomenon creating new spaces where gender and gender interaction can be redefined:

Globally, there are also multiple definitions of gendered identity: Maleness and femaleness are not expressed in the same ways in all societies. Mobile men and women and place-less cultures are redefining the meanings of male and female as well, adopting elements of multiple cultures to create new conceptions of masculinity and femininity. (Iyall Smith 2008: 7–8)

## 4 CONCLUSION

Globalization and the new means of communication made our planet a much smaller place. It is now far easier to communicate with people from anywhere in the world that have grown in a totally different environment. In that sense, by multiplying exchanges between humans, the rise of new communication technology can potentially broaden the ways we see and enrich our life experience. We are no longer growing up in closed societies, where our identity is shaped by a relation to what is seen and felt in reality and proximity. The influence of the microcosm where one grew up is no longer the only determinant factor that shapes our identities. Our societies and identities are now potentially hybrid ones, negotiated through fragmented societies, shaped by forces and influences with extensible not to say close to inexistent boundaries. With globalization, the reflexive self is making individual choices based on not only what has influenced the immediate local reality, but also from a realm of imagination that is extended through the global imagery available through the media and the internet.

The tools developed to communicate on the internet such as unavoidable social networks are virtual spaces where influences blossom and where one can exchange with people who share common ideas, values and interests. Nevertheless, even if considered as a social network, Couchsurfing brings us further as it facilitates not only virtual, but person-to-person contacts on a worldwide scale, quickly and deeply. It generates encounters where members can shape their hybrid identity — an identity that embodies both the local and the global.

As a phenomenon, Couchsurfing is also an example of what is called “glocalization”,

a notion which helps one to grasp the many interconnections between the global and the local and a means whereby individuals can grasp and participate in new forms of global awareness by adapting global process to local realities, while

maintaining and/or rediscovering local solidarities. (Abbas, Yasmine, and Fred Dervin 2009: 34)

These new interconnections and the global awareness are possible through the “spaces” the Couchsurfing members generate when they meet. Couchsurfing creates intimate, meaningful, “spaces” where participants can learn from the “proximate global”, where they can confront imposed ideas through a “lived” intercultural dialogue, where they can determine what they value the most and question the constantly evolving human experience with people from all around the world sitting next to them.

However, even if this particular “space” is potentially created everywhere by Couchsurfing, the environment where it is happening is still subject to local socio-cultural realities and power dynamics. The “interculturality” of the practice of Couchsurfing is manifested through the local adaptation the participants must perform in order to make this “space” happen and these particular Couchsurfing practices accepted in their “culturally embedded” communities. The local cultural environment forces the participants to adjust the way they host and meet each other. For example, as we saw, the participants would involve their family and surroundings in their practice of Couchsurfing. By doing so, their participation becomes more obvious to the public eye, nothing is done secretly. This strategy limits the gossiping that could eventually happen and affect their reputation. If their participation in Couchsurfing is not adapted to the local culture, the women must deal with rumours, social stigma, legal authorities and live with consequences that may impact notably, their chances of getting married.

Simultaneously, this “interculturality” of the practice of Couchsurfing is also manifested by the different ways Couchsurfing can be used and the outcomes it produces in different cultural environments. As shown in this study, in gender-segregated societies, Couchsurfing confers to its female participants various forms of capital, more freedom, new life opportunities, unfamiliar gender dynamics and empowerment. Couchsurfing is an open door to the world for these women, but it is also a “culturally embedded”

practice. These women from gender unequal societies can manoeuvre between Couchsurfing and their more conservative local cultural environment and use their learning and experiences to gain more control over the course of their existence. As shown in this study, Couchsurfing has revealed to them ways to broaden their world and their knowledge of gender dynamics. Globally, by making travel abroad accessible, different contacts with the opposite gender or acquiring knowledge about the world and locally, by providing them with new enriching local networks and local recognition. This simultaneous usage of the global and the local develops their social capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital, which eventually can be transformed as agency. These is a significant outcome for these women born in non-Western highly gender societies.

Lastly, Couchsurfing may help to re-balance gender equalities globally, a basic human right, but it may also spread other cosmopolitan ideas. The participant from Morocco summarizes her vision of Couchsurfing as a place that “makes you more human” (I2: 28), humans that are all the same, regardless of gender would conclude my interviewee from Malaysia:

And, yeah, I begin to love it like, it is like I feel this is really my, my comfort zone basically. We talk about culture all the time, we talk about traveling we, no matter where we are from, no matter what religion, no matter how we look, we are the same. (I5: 95)

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire

- 1) Chit-chat to put the person comfortable.
- 2) Explain this is for my thesis in Vaasa.
- 3) It will stay anonymous.
- 4) Don't be shy if I am silenced. I take notes and see about my questions. I listen to you, I take notes.

### Interview questions

- 1) Can you introduce yourself, name, where you are from (country and city or village)
- 2) What can you tell us about your **surfing** experience? Where, how many times, whose home did you surfed in, were you surfing alone...how did it go?
- 3) What can you tell us about your **hosting** experience?

-Who did you host?

- 4) Why do you participate in COUCHSURFING? What are your motivations?
- 5) Do you think your participation in COUCHSURFING will affect your life? If yes, how?
- 6) What do you expect from people you host?
- 7) What do you expect from the people you surf their couch?
- 8) What do people around you (neighbours, parents, friends, girlfriends...) think about COUCHSURFING in general?
- 9) Has Couch Surfing influenced/changed your understanding or idea of men and women relation?
- 10) How do you think COUCHSURFING can affect the society you live in?
- 11) How do you deal with the people questioning or judging the fact that you are hosting men or surfing in men's apartments or guiding men around your city?
- 12) How would you describe your society in terms of men/women relations

13) How would you describe your own family style in terms of men/women relations (and their respective sphere of activities and duties)

Some info about yourself for statistical purposes. Are you ?

14) Men/ Women

15) How big is your locality (population)?

16) How old are you?

17) How many years of formal school education (or their equivalent) did you complete (starting with primary school)?

18) If you have or have had a paid job, what kind of job is it / was it?

19) What is your nationality?

20) When did you join COUCHSURFING?

21) Have you ever lived abroad for a period over 3 months? If yes, where?