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Implications of Couchsurfing: Sustainability, Education, Capitol

donald roberson

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Couchsurfing Implications (oral presentation)

Introduction

Often tourists are motivated to connect with local citizens during their travel; many travelers believe this can make a positive impact throughout our world. Our countries have become more isolated and insular, rather than integrated and supportive. Suspicion of others as well as their ways of life may augment prejudice and conflict. Rather than becoming more peaceful, this century has witnessed increasing nationalism, conflict, and even war. One simple way to promote peace and helpfulness to others is through the medium of travel or tourism. One way this may happen is through a website called CouchSurfing (CS). The online participants and those involved with CS are convinced this experience can improve the situation in our world.

Literature Review

Picard and Buchberger (2013) discuss the new and tantalizing concept of couchsurfing. Is this website actually, doing as it claims, to make the world a better place? What is the reflection of couchsurfing on our current trends in travel and tourism? Is CS a rejection of hotels and motels or just a cheap way to move around. This new form of travel, with four million participants, is oriented toward the brave, dependence on the internet, and the potential that anything can happen during this experience. Similar to ideas of O'Regan (2013) the relationship between the traveler and the host can become very dynamic and balancing between negative and positive.

Molz (2013a) goes into detail of one CS who is traversing the world with no money. Is this budget traveler something to admire or just a homeless wanderer? Does CS promote this sort

of behavior, a drop out mentality, or is he some sort of new travel guru that promotes this new world order. Molz emphasizes when you sleep for free there is still a sense of reciprocity. There still is some sort of exchange between the host and the guest. The CS community promotes connections between people from different cultures fostering positive and negative scenarios (Zuev, 2013).

Bialski (2013) has been involved in a five year ethnographic study of CS with 3500 open ended surveys. CS has grown from 30,000 users in 2005 to almost 5 million registered participants today. Every week there are 40,024 positive 'get-togethers' through the CS website versus 84 negative ones. And, every week there are an estimated 189,879 people who have made a close friendship connection through couchsurfing. There are new ways to connect socially over the internet such as - four square, messaging, snapchats, as well as CS. Much of this research is on the experience whereas safety seems overlooked or assumed. The CS experience is based on an assumption of trust and safety. Therefore the purpose of this study is to explore and to understand more how CS can be a safe travel exchange.

Methodology

Twenty-six students from my classes volunteered to participate in this research project on Couchsurfing (CS). My participants joined the CS website and planned their own trip. Additionally they met for several weeks in order to discuss their experience.

The participants could choose between a variety of CS activities; they needed to complete one of these within the next two months. This included the options of hosting, or going, or attending a local CS event. Also during this time we decided to focus our attention on the 'safety'

of the CS experience. We also created a questionnaire as a class project that each person would complete after their own experience. Each person created their own questionnaire after reading the website and after reading other information as well as research papers on CS. As a class we chose ten of the questions we felt best portrayed the validity of this research.

Results

The following answers to the questionnaire reveal the main answers of the participants. A (parenthesis) is a note from the author and if a number is blank there were no comments.

About you. What is your CS experience? Put a mark in all the places that is true for you.
I slept on someone's 'couch.' 20 yes; 6 no (some of them slept in beds rather than couches).
How often? 34 times. I have been a host of another couchsurfer. 6 yes, 8 no How often? 19 times. I have attended a CS event. 1 yes How often? 1 I have created a CS event? No one

1. Did you have any negative experience from your time with CS? Yes – 5; /No – 17 What was it?

*I had to wait for one hour for my host, but that was all

*when we met our host, she gave us the keys and left, she had a dinner with her friends, we were in the house and did not know what to use, or how to use it

*my first meeting, my host did not have time this evening, plus our arrival was delayed, so she was upset

2. What do you think are three main guidelines to make sure one has a safe CS experience?

*Previous conversations – 16

*Check out the references – 16

*Check their profile – 15 (it must be positive, with good reviews) (realize this takes time!)

3. One means the least safe and Ten means very safe, rank how you felt during your experience.

Before going on CS experience: (least) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (most). And why?

5 people said 5; “because it was my first CS experience, I did not know where I was going, everything was an intrigue and surprise to me, I had always before been in hotels, so I was nervous

3 said 6; “I was not certain to know if I was going to a safe place”

2 said 7 “I did not know anything about the host, but we exchanged some messages who reassured me, but with all the stories we hear we can be scared

3 said 8 “I was not sure what to expect, one can describe me as paranoid and cautious at times”

and 4 said 9 “I talk with my host and everything seemed okay, so I felt safe

2 said 10 “My host was so nice, and before I read all the references and they are all really positive”

During the CS experience: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10. Why

1 said 5;

1 – 6;

9 – 8; Felt safe but I knew that I was sleeping in a strange house

2 – 9;

Our host trust us so we trust her, she gave us a key for her flat, maybe I was not so comfortable, but for sure safe

5 – 10.

My host was very friendly and open minded

After the CS experience: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10. Why

1 – 6;

1 - 7

4 – 8;

After this I was happy, and I have more trust in CS

5 – 9;

Actually I thought that anything could have happened during my sleep, but it was not like that

I felt more comfortable with this new idea of travelling and excited to repeat it again

8 – 10.

Because I came to Olomouc safe and alive, everything had been perfect, I felt very safe in any moment and I wanted to repeat the experience if I have the possibility

4. What are some factors to consider from the profile if someone is to be considered safe?

Positive reference – 19

Profile photos – 14 (also includes photos of place, how does the person picture themselves, and what does their face indicate through the photo)

Previous conversations – 9 (including phone, sms, and email)

Being verified – 6

Personal information – 6

5. What are some factors to consider from the profile if someone is to be considered non-safe?

Lack of photos – 10

Negative references – 9

Lack of references or comments – 9

Not enough information on profile – 8

6. Are there some suggestions you have in order to improve the Website – internet program of CS?

3 - Add an i.d. to take control of fakers, or drivers license

Add a course, to show how it works and how to use it

Have the possibility of video chatting

7. What did you enjoy about your CS experience?

As a guest -

*Being abroad is always a great experience and I have enjoyed my visit in Italy. We were CS just one night.

*They were able to see that we were very tired from our travels so instead of talking for an extensive period, they allowed us to nap after showing us good places to visit during our stay in their city, they also gave us space and time alone to allow us to stick to our schedule and see the

city how we wanted to and did not require us to have dinner or spend time with them as some host do on their profile, they were very good hosts who just allowed us to enjoy our stay in their city without overcomplicating anything, and they also made breakfast which delightful, they lived in a very good location of the city as well

*I enjoyed meeting other people with different language and culture and the possibility to see the place that I chose without worries about finding a room in a hotel or to know where I could go around the city

8. What did you not enjoy about your CS experience?

*I did not enjoy so much living with people that I did not know, I am so shy

*you are conditioned by their life when you are CS, if they have to work or study you may have to wait for them until they return

*we stayed up late and were talking, but it was worth it

9. If something had gone wrong, did you have a plan of how to handle this? What was it?

*leave the place (3), stay in contact with one of your friends

*Go to a hostel (2) and call the police if necessary, tell your friends and your parents you are going

*Yes to have a getaway idea

10. Any additional comment you feel is important about CS safety?

**This is an adventure experience and nice to do one time, but if you want to have more comfortable travel, I think couch surfing is not for you, you have to adapt you and enjoy this beautiful experience.

**Good to do this one time, but if you are traveling with a group of people, no one will take care of you with a large group.

**CS is very nice experience, really enjoyable, new way of travel, and keeps the spirit and essence of travel, I would recommend to all, it is for adventure seekers for curious people and for those who want to share

**nice experience I enjoyed it very much, I like this way of travel and seeing the world, to all people who are adventurous, who like intrigue and excitement

Conclusion and Discussion

There seems to be an assumption in CS that everyone is trustworthy and reliable. This rainbow perspective of travel and tourism is dominant; however, there is also a dark side of travel. There are unethical tourists, some who are taking advantage of others, or some who are hoping for some sexual pleasure, or some other hidden agenda than what is expressed is not mentioned. Travel places the sojourner in an awkward state where others may take advantage. Therefore, it is imperative that safety issues among CS be clearly addressed.

According to my participants, CS can be completely safe and a reliable way to travel. The traveler must spend adequate time on the internet investigating the profile of the potential host. Reading comments from others, and confirming what they are saying by pictures they post. The second level is to contact the host by email and phone. The relationship between you and the host is very dynamic and can precede in a positive or negative manner.

CS can be safe if one is willing to do the following. 1. Spend necessary amount of time searching over the Website the information of the potential host. 2. Travel with another person, someone of an opposite gender. 3. Stay with a family. 4. Let your family and friends know what

you are doing and where you are going and the contact. 5. Contact the host by phone before you arrive. 6. Have a backup plan if there is any problem or concern.

Despite the fallacies surrounding the idea of 'Brexit' or concerns of xenophobia, we can also conclude that there is a friendlier world. Or rather that those who want to meet others from different countries and cultures are figuring out ways to make this happen. Perhaps the younger generations are more trusting around each other. Can this also be due to birth control, and that today there is more equality of control over who will become pregnant. Internet technology is developing very fast, and those who are comfortable with, and can afford it, are those who will be able to take advantage of such programs as CS. Some people are very motivated by saving money, especially money that would previously have gone to some large hotel. Many people are fed up with paying large fees for motel/hotel rooms that are not that nice. CS has liberated many of these people. And lastly, CS seems to be a unique way to meet others and to get to know local cultures.

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