

## **Share Your Life and Get More of Yourself. Experience Sharing in CouchSurfing.**

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Katharina Hellwig, HEC Lausanne  
Felicitas Morhart, HEC Lausanne  
Kocher, Bruno, HEC Lausanne  
Zisiadis, George, Independent Researcher

*By means of a multi-sited multi-method ethnography of CouchSurfing.org, this study explores what motivates consumers to share their homes with strangers. Our findings suggest that participation is best understood by focusing on experience sharing and identify four types of experiential capital as sources of self-enhancement.*

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## **Share Your Life and Get More of Yourself. Experience Sharing in CouchSurfing**

Sharing is the new talk of the town. Its advocates (Botsman and Rogers 2010; Gansky 2010; Sacks 2011) but also popular media like the *Time* magazine (Walsh 2011) or *The Economist* (2013) hold sharing to be a game changer for the world's consumption patterns – or at least for those in the industrialized nations that such coverage usually centers on. Summarized under different labels like “collaborative consumption”, “sharing economy”, “the mesh” or “peer-to-peer economy”, we see a variety of “sharing businesses” that are rapidly gaining importance in the international marketplace. Commonly mentioned examples include bike- and car-sharing systems (Lamberton and Rose 2012), toy-sharing (Ozanne and Ballantine 2010), land-sharing and Community Supported Agriculture (Schnell 2007) as well as exchange systems like Freecycle or Craigslist (Arsel and Dobscha 2011; Nelson and Rademacher 2009). One of the most prominent hallmarks of the “sharing economy” (Sacks 2011) is the hospitality platform CouchSurfing where members offer shelter and oftentimes food and entertainment to strangers. With almost six million people (March 2014) in over 97,000 cities worldwide (“CouchSurfing Statistics” 2014) sharing their space with people they have never met before, the CouchSurfing project exemplifies that non-commercial sharing among strangers is more than a niche phenomenon. While the benefits for the “surfers” who use the offer of free accommodation are somewhat straightforward, the motivations of the hosts providing their space appear more bewildering. Given that there is a considerable range of market-based alternatives such as AirBnB, we wondered why people choose to share shelter, time and oftentimes even food and drinks with strangers whom they have never met before and will possibly never meet again, while consciously renouncing monetary gain or other tangible remuneration. The question guiding our research is hence *why* CouchSurfing hosts offer their hospitality to strangers. By means of a multi-method multi-sited ethnography of CouchSurfing, we explore the concept of experience sharing and suggest that such sharing can lead to self-enhancement as an immaterial partible possession.

### **Sharing as Mode of Consumption**

Sharing can be seen as one of the most basic forms of human economic behavior - its existence and relevance as a form of exchange in human societies can be traced back several hundreds of thousands of years (Price 1975). While it has not found much attention in the context of consumption for many years, sharing has recently regained traction among consumers. However, despite its relevance as a mode of consumption, sharing has only recently started to receive attention in consumer research. Most prominent in this domain are the conceptual definitions and classifications of different sharing types put forward by Belk (Belk 2007, 2010, 2013a) and Belk and Llamas (2011, 2012). In his seminal paper on sharing as a mode of consumption, Belk (2007) defines sharing as “the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use and/or the act and process of receiving or taking something from others for our use” (p. 126). Another definition stemming from Benkler (2004) conceptualizes sharing as “nonreciprocal pro-social behavior”. In differentiation from gift-giving and commodity exchange as other forms of economic exchange, sharing is defined as involving joint ownership (at least de facto), pro-social intentions and excluding direct expectations of reciprocity (Belk 2010, 2013a). The focus of hitherto existing literature on sharing has been to understand the sharing of objects that are material in nature. However, we suggest that the definitions used in consumer research and their focus on material objects only cover a part of the meaning that is intuitively and ubiquitously associated with the term sharing. Concretely, we suggest that the immaterial aspect

of *joint experience* constitutes an essential part of the concept of sharing that has not yet received considerable attention in consumer research. Through such experiential understanding of sharing, we aim to unpack the seemingly counterintuitive acts of sharing among strangers. At the same time, we challenge extant definitions of sharing, as an experiential understanding of sharing involves an element of reciprocity between involved parties that has traditionally been conceptualized as being incompatible with the idea of sharing.

## **Method**

Our study is based on a longitudinal multi-method and multi-sited collection of qualitative data over a three year period. The methods include qualitative in-depth interviews, participant observation and the analysis of online contents such as member profiles, blog entries, forum discussions and news articles. Our total sample comprises 36 CouchSurfing hosts aged 22-36 from Europe and the Americas, 15 of them being female. This is in accordance with CouchSurfing general user statistics ("CouchSurfing Statistics" 2014). The interviews lasted from 30 to 150 minutes and were captured on digital audio files and transcribed. We interpreted our data by means of a hermeneutic approach (Thompson and Haytko 1997) and used our field notes and comparisons with web-content (i.e., participants' online profiles and contributions on discussion boards) as sources of triangulation to validate the attitudes and behaviors reported in the interviews (Mays and Pope 1995).

## **Results**

Our results are structured into three main parts: We first introduce the idea of experience sharing and discuss this perspective on sharing in the light of hitherto existing sharing theories. These insights will serve as the linchpin for introducing the idea of experiential capital and identifying four types of experiential capital that emerged from our data. In line with literature on experiential consumption we suggest that the consumption of such "experiential capital" can in fact contribute to self-enhancement (Keinan and Kivetz 2011). The last part of the results section discusses the role of reciprocity in the light of the particular win-win situation that we see occurring in CouchSurfing and revisits notions of reciprocity in hitherto existing theories on sharing.

### ***Experience sharing***

*"It's about people looking to meet other people, new other people, different people, and learning, exchanging about the different experiences, different cultures, different centers of interest. Not about going to someone and just sleeping, it's about spending time together and exchanging non material things. That's the important things in that project" (Interview with Claude, 29, Luxembourg)*

This quote is representative of statements that occurred in one or another form in almost all of our interviews: CouchSurfing is not about a free place to stay and neither is it, at its core, about the act of sharing a couch and lodging. Rather, we find that it is the experiences that are jointly produced and consumed by the involved parties that are subject to true sharing in CouchSurfing. The actual time that the two (or more) CouchSurfing partners spend together constitutes the most important part of the CouchSurfing experience. In many narratives, our respondents talked about exceptional and rich experiences they have had with "their" CouchSurfers and most of them stress sharing intimate and identity relevant information, knowledge and skills. Material sharing in contrast has been found to merely serve as a catalyst and an enabler for sharing experiences in the context of CouchSurfing. What is however important for this kind of sharing is that the value

of the shared experience is necessarily linked to a vivid interaction of the involved parties. This simultaneous co-creation and shared consumption of the experience requires that the involved parties are being fully present at the moment. Experience sharing does hence not allow for any shortcuts, neither can it be consumed in a time-delayed fashion. It is a type of real-time consumption that requires direct input and effort from both sides. Several of our interviewees mentioned that there are moments in which they cannot bring up the necessary energy to host and surf with another member, which implies intensive emotional involvement. In such moments they said they would rather choose commercial alternatives such as hotels, hostels or AirBnB. This finding points at an important particularity that characterizes the CouchSurfing experience: the absence of money. Offering or taking money from one's CouchSurfing partners is an explicitly articulated taboo among CouchSurfers. Many of our informants see money in opposition to the community values that they associate with CouchSurfing and fear that money in the system would decrease the interest in personal exchange as money is perceived as a strong end in itself. This is in line with the argument of Belk (2010) who suggests that introducing money into a setting converts the sharing experience to commodity exchange. Money does not only lead individuals to act less socially towards others (Vohs, Mead, and Goode 2006), but it has also been shown that a high salience of money alters perceptions of time and leads individuals to use their time more efficiently (Mogilner and Aaker 2009). Such an efficiency shortcut towards desired outcomes is absent on CouchSurfing and is inhibited by the design of the consumption experience.

### ***Experiential capital as source of self-enhancement***

*“Thinking rationally, CouchSurfing gives you a lot of profit just not the material ones. You get a lot of benefits from knowing other people, enjoying the pleasure of talking, of learning, of finding out about different ideas, different languages. This is all a profit. We cannot forget about that because things like that they're often more valuable than money. [...] After all, no one is really altruist. We all do something because we want to get some kind of profit from that. And every CouchSurfer thus would host because he wants to get the perfect experience from this, and this is what they get; the enjoyment, the pleasure.” (Interview with Karl, 20, Montpellier)*

Karl uses the metaphor of “profit” for showing that he sees indeed a number of benefits for himself in CouchSurfing. Although no money is involved and free accommodation and gifts as manifestations of material value merely play a subordinate role in the social exchanges of CouchSurfing, there is still an emergence of lasting benefits for the involved parties. We suggest that the benefits Karl and other CouchSurfers talked about can be characterized as “experiential capital”, in the sense that they represent an assembly of identity-relevant meanings, skills and cultural learning that can be collected and are of lasting value to the individual. Four types of such experiential capital have emerged as outcome of experience sharing from our data: Ego Boost, Learning, an inner glow from helping others and self-authentication. In line with prior work on experiential consumption showing that experiences can be used by the individual to build and reinforce her self-concept (Arnould and Price 1993, Carù and Cova 2003, Keinan and Kivetz 2011), we suggest that these four types of experiential capital are used as sources for self-enhancement by the CouchSurfers.

***Ego Boost.*** The lay term “ego boost” refers to the finding that the participants appeared to validate and bolster their self-image with the help of their respective CouchSurfing partners. The selection procedure plays a particularly important role in this process because it allows hosts to choose particularly interesting, entertaining and prestigious guests. Moreover, an interesting and

complete profile including captivating descriptions and positive references from others represents a status symbol and sign of reputational capital in the CouchSurfing community because it attracts more requests from interested guests and hence serves as a reconfirmation of the hosts' identity as vivid and successful CouchSurfer.

**Learning.** Mutual learning is an important aspect of the CouchSurfing experience. It is not only prominently featured in the templates of the personal profiles but also plays an important role for CouchSurfing members in our interviews. We identified two prominently featured types of learning that occurred in our data. The first one refers to a unilateral type of learning that involves themes such as practicing and improving language or sportive skills and knowledge about geography and cultures. But beyond this, much of the learning that has been observed is closely linked to a more indirect, interpersonal type of learning. Many of our informants mentioned such types of learning that simply occur by meeting and interacting with people who are different from themselves, who come from other cultures, who live lifestyles that they are not yet familiar with or hold different religious or spiritual views.

**Inner glow of pro-social behavior.** Helping others or simply doing something perceived as good is prominently mentioned as a motive for participating in CouchSurfing. When asked about favorite CouchSurfing experiences, our respondents often referred to the good feeling that helping others provided them. We know from the literature on pro-social spending (Dunn, Aknin, and Norton 2008) but also from behavioral economics (Khalil 2004) that behavior that is perceived to be altruistic and beneficial to others comes with a "warm inner glow" of positive emotions. In line with Ariely and Norton (2009, 544) who suggest that "being altruistic is often seen as 'good,' and being greedy or selfish is not.", providing a free couch to others also served our participants as a way to signal to others and also to themselves that they are a "good" person.

**Self-authentication.** Differentiation from mainstream is a goal that has been prominently articulated by many CouchSurfing hosts. This is in line with research on the quest for authentic experiences that has been found to be one of the cornerstones of postmodern consumption (Goulding 2000; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Peñaloza 2000). Participants repeatedly mentioned feelings of "travelling without leaving the house", that is, feelings of having been personally at the places that were the subject of their guests' narratives. This is in line with the findings of Grayson and Martinec (2004) and MacCannell (1973) that authenticity can in fact be subjectively created and that such crafted or "staged" authenticity can lead to satisfying the individual quest for authentic experiences.

The fact that many CouchSurfing participants very visibly display such experiential capital not only on their CouchSurfing profiles but also in their "real" life, for example manifested by a CouchSurfing map with memorabilia of all CouchSurfing experiences pinned to the respective home countries of the CouchSurfing partners, shows that they do indeed perceive such experiential capital as relevant for their self-concepts. We see the self-enhancement stemming from these four types of experiential capital as an immaterial, partible possession that is not attached to concrete material assets and constitutes a lasting outcome that is relevant to the individual long after the shared experience has ended.

### ***Reciprocity in CouchSurfing***

*"Above all, nobody does it just for the other person. Nobody does that for the sake of the other person. It's a win-win situation. It should be a win-win situation [...] Very few things are altruistic, I think, in life and CouchSurfing is not one of them. No, it's not. Even if you don't get*

*something physical, if you don't get a coffee, you always get something in return even if that is building yourself, like getting something for yourself. It's not altruistic. We do it because we like it." (Interview with Valeria, 25, Lausanne)*

Existing literature on sharing assumes that true sharing comes about without the involvement of reciprocity. And although we see the interactions taking place on CouchSurfing as a form of true sharing, we also found many indicators that point to the existence of reciprocal claims. From the quote of Valeria for example we see that she does in fact anticipate a return on her engagement with the CouchSurfing partner. Similar expectations have been expressed by several CouchSurfers in our study and are also mirrored by observational and ethnographic data. However, and to this extent we agree with Belk (2010, 2013a), the reciprocity that is implied here is not an expression of direct, or tit-for-tat reciprocity (Sahlins 1972). What we have found in our data is also in many cases distinct from indirect or even generalized reciprocity that assume a circular understanding of giving and taking. Rather, we find that self-centered and other-related goals are almost inseparably intermingled in the context of CouchSurfing. The characteristics of the consumption experience and the nature of the identity sharing in it make it hard for one party to benefit from participating in CouchSurfing without providing benefits to others. This is reflected by Valeria's quote when she refers to CouchSurfing as a win-win situation in which both parties become better off, another scheme that reoccurred in the interviews. We see such intermingledness of pro-social and egoistic behaviors rooted in the close connection between pro-social enactments and their returns for the individual (Ariely, Bracha, and Meier 2009; Soosai-Nathan, Negri, and Delle Fave 2013, 109), a finding that is in fact likely to also occur in other sharing contexts. Such intermingledness of egoistic and altruistic motives for pro-social action, which has similarly been put forward by Mauss (1925/1967) in his theory of gift giving is however not addressed by Belk's (2007, 2010) seminal sharing theory. Rather, his definition applies a very distinct social psychology perspective which tends to underemphasize such social dynamics between individuals. Taking this perspective even further, recent discussions on the intermingledness of egoistic and other-oriented identity goals also criticize the binary system of self versus others that is prevalent in Western thinking (Soosai-Nathan, Negri, and Delle Fave 2013). Asian traditions (Jayasundar 2013) but also Western natural scientific approaches like systems theory (Von Bertalanffy 1950) or quantum physics (Feynman 1966) in contrast traditionally emphasize the interconnectedness and interdependence of self and others. We therefore suggest that, for a holistic understanding of sharing as a collaborative form of consumption, it might be fruitful to choose perspectives and methods that are capable to challenge such model of binary thinking of self versus others.

## **Discussion**

Our analysis of CouchSurfing helps to comprehend sharing among strangers and contributes to a better understanding of non-commercial sharing platforms that represent a rising consumption phenomenon. The study contributes to the recent discussion on sharing in that it introduces the idea of experience sharing, which provides a complementary perspective to the focus on sharing material resources. Additionally, we introduce the concept of experiential capital and point out how such experiential capital can lead to self-enhancement as concrete outcome of sharing. To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to outline concrete outcomes of sharing that, despite several anecdotal references (Botsman and Rogers 2010; Sacks 2011) made to the potential connection between sharing and consumer well-being, have not yet found much attention in sharing theories. Finally, we discuss the issue of reciprocity in shared experiences that we see as being rooted in an intermingling of self- and other-directed goals. This perspective challenges

Belk's (2007, 2010) definition of sharing that is currently widely taken for granted in consumer research.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

Shared consumption experiences can be seen as a cornerstone of the rapidly growing “sharing economy”. Our research context is non-commercial in nature and we believe that the absence of money constitutes an important infrastructural factor for the type of experience sharing observed in CouchSurfing. Nevertheless it would be interesting to study peer-to-peer consumption settings in which such experience sharing is combined with a commercial interest. Examples would be the hospitality platform AirBnB (when AirBnB hosts merely rent out a room in their apartment or share rooms with their guests) but also ride share schemes like Mitfahrgelegenheit.de that constitute similar real time experiences.

Certainly our study is not without limitations. Although we attempted to address a sample that does justice to the range of users participating in CouchSurfing, we acknowledge that our results might not be generalizable without confines. An important limitation of our study is the scope of experience sharing models like CouchSurfing. Even if we encountered a diverse group of CouchSurfers in terms of age and demographic status, we are fully aware that there are numerous individuals for whom sharing their time with strangers remains unthinkable. Similarly we know from anecdotal narratives that some individuals have initially engaged in CouchSurfing with enthusiasm, but later decided to discontinue active participation. Due to our focus on active and convinced CouchSurfers, this negative space remains unexplored in the current study. Further studies might look more closely at the boundaries of sharing systems based on shared experiences and explore under which individual and systemic conditions such might fail or break down.

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## Appendix

**Table 1: Summary of main findings**

Theme	Description	Exemplary data excerpt
<b>Experience Sharing</b>	Rather than being about the act of sharing a couch and lodging, we find sharing on CouchSurfing to be about experiences that are jointly produced and consumed by the involved parties	<i>"It's about people looking to meet other people, new other people, different people, and learning, exchanging about the different experiences, different cultures, different centers of interest. Not about going to someone and just sleeping, it's about spending time together and exchanging non material things. That's the important things in that project" (Interview with Claude, 29, Luxembourg)</i>
<b>Experiential Capital</b>	Assembly of identity-relevant meanings, skills and cultural learning that is constructed during a shared CouchSurfing experience. Experiential capital can be accumulated and is of lasting value to an individual (Keinan and Kivetz 2011)	<i>"Thinking rationally, CouchSurfing gives you a lot of profit just not the material ones. You get a lot of benefits from knowing other people, enjoying the pleasure of talking, of learning, of finding out about different ideas, different languages. This is all a profit. We cannot forget about that because things like that they're often more valuable than money. [...] After all, no one is really altruist. We all do something because we want to get some kind of profit from that. And every CouchSurfer thus would host because he wants to get the perfect experience from this, and this is what they get; the enjoyment, the pleasure." (Interview with Karl, 20, Montpellier)</i>
	<p><b>Ego Boost.</b> Validation and bolstering of self-image via</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being able to choose particularly interesting, exotic, entertaining and prestigious guests</li> <li>Being chosen as a host based on personal profile information</li> </ol>	<p><i>"Um, yeah. I think it definitely makes my life more...puts more color in my life. I get to meet more friends, and I get to meet people, you know, that I would never have met. Well, I host... Actually I have hosted some very interesting people. I've hosted a professional ironman triathlete. She won the Austrian ironman. So I hosted her, and I hosted like an entrepreneur. [...] I host um, people from interesting backgrounds." (Interview with Tim, 27, New York City)</i></p> <p><i>"I just need to have a feeling that they chose ME. It's not that they just chose the town: 'Oh she's living in Oslo we can couchsurf there'. But more that 'Okay, this looks like person we can get along with.' [...] I just need to know that they didn't just see Oslo and then send a request and have absolutely no idea of who I am, what I think, and what I believe in, anything." (Interview with Anya, 21, Oslo)</i></p>
	<p><b>Learning.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unilateral learning: improving language skills and knowledge about geography and cultures</li> <li>Indirect, interpersonal type of learning by meeting and interacting with people different from oneself, coming from other cultures or holding different religious or spiritual views.</li> </ol>	<p><i>Neuroscience means life. Neuronal networks don't mean only biology and genetic studies, but also talking, thinking, sharing... Anthropology, philosophy, cultures, history, all is based on our thoughts and experience. That's what I work with and the passion I want to share with CouchSurfers. Then I can teach you how to shoot a nice pic or how to plan a very funny cooking session! (Excerpt from the "Teach, Learn, Share" section of an online CouchSurfing profile)</i></p> <p><i>"It's always nice to meet people from other countries. They always offer you something new, something that you haven't thought about before because there is this spectrum of life and there are so many things in this life and we wear those goggles and we can only focus on four or five things. It's impossible to focus on more; each one focuses on four or five different things.</i></p>

		<i>So, whenever you meet somebody that has a different background than you, different social status than you, different studies than you, it's normal that they will see something that you haven't seen. That's something I've always craved for and with CouchSurfing I found that a lot.” (Interview with Valeria, 25, Lausanne)</i>
	<b>Inner glow of pro-social behavior.</b> Offering a free place and hospitality to other CouchSurfers provides hosts with a “warm inner glow” of positive emotions and signals being a “good person” to the self and others (Ariely and Norton 2009; Dunn, Aknin, and Norton 2008; Khalil 2004)	<i>“Well in a way I would feel more, let's say, proud, to help someone who can't find a couch. I would really feel like I'm more helping someone. Like with you. If I can help someone with a last minute request I would be just a little bit more happy.” (Interview with Paulo, 30, Rome)</i>
	<b>Self-authentication.</b> “Travelling without leaving the house” as experience of “staged” authenticity (Grayson and Martinec 2004; MacCannell 1973)	<i>“I love that. Really. I cannot travel a lot so it's my way to travel, I cannot see the world so I invite the world at home. I love when people, passionate people explain me our... make me travel with their eyes.” (Interview with Marion, 27, Montpellier)</i>
<b>Reciprocity in CouchSurfing</b>	Existence of reciprocity in CouchSurfing is rooted in intermingledness of self-centered and other-related goals	<i>“Above all, nobody does it just for the other person. Nobody does that for the sake of the other person. It's a win-win situation. It should be a win-win situation. So, I think it's very important that there are some lines that are respected. [...] Very few things are altruistic, I think, in life and CouchSurfing is not one of them. No, it's not. Even if you don't get something physical, if you don't get a coffee, you always get something in return even if that is building yourself, like getting something for yourself. It's not altruistic. We do it because we like it.” (Interview with Valeria, 25, Lausanne)</i>