

Couchsurfing, how it works? Who use it?

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of communication is always creating new ways of socialization or sometimes just improving the existing ones.

This paper is the result of the survey taking care in couchsurfing online community, the larger Hospitality Exchange online community.

In the way as an active participant in the community, as a participant-observation also bringing a questionnaire to some members of the community helps to take the information for building this study.

Keywords

Couchsurfing, social, community, web,

INTRODUCTION

With the evolution of transportation, the value for traveling and the inexistence of almost any borders in almost every corner of the globe, from Angola to Mongolia, make it possible to be a tourist to almost everyone, going into someone else's home is possibly the last true travelling experience. And for the growing legion of couch-surfing members, is the best way to really get to know the place and culture that you are visiting.

CouchSurfing was started by Casey Fenton in 2003 and is currently the largest hospitality exchange network. Also the term "couch surf" has been around

for decades, it used to mean staying on friends' couches.

Hospitality Exchange, also known as "hospitality services", "accommodation sharing", and "home stay networks", often refers to centrally organized social networks of individuals who trade accommodation without monetary exchange. While the concept of free accommodation could also include house swapping or even time share plans, it is associated mostly with travellers and tourists staying with one another free of charge. The Polish sociologist Paula Bialski even calls it "emotional tourism", because meeting locals indeed involves a lot of emotions and maybe this is exactly how it differs from the classical mainstream package tour

The first Hospitality Exchange Network Setup in 1948 by Bob Luitweiler, it was originally called 'PeaceBuilders'

Since the 1990s, these services have increasingly moved away from using printed catalogues and telephone lines, but members often use Internet websites. These have grown exponentially since 2000 and as of March, 2007 over 650,000 people are registered users of these networks, which vary in operational structure, layout and geographic focus.

However, Hospitality Exchange is far more than just accommodation. Some members do not offer a place to stay, but also provide dinner, a guided tour, tourist information or will help find a cheap hostel or alternative means of accommodation. Also those travellers who face most difficulties - like handicapped people - find great opportunity and help in networks like BeWelcome, where members can both invite travellers with wheelchairs (according to the accessibility of their place) and use the search function to find the very same hosts.

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HOW IT WORKS

After registering, which is free, members have the option of providing very detailed information and pictures of themselves and of the sleeping accommodation being offered, if any. The more information provided by a member improves the chances that someone will find the member trustworthy enough to be their host or guest. Names and addresses may be verified by volunteers. Members looking for accommodation can search for hosts using several parameters such as age, location, sex, and activity level. Home stays are entirely consensual between the host and guest, and the duration, nature, and terms of the guest's stay are generally worked out in advance to the convenience of both parties. No monetary exchange takes place except under certain circumstances (e.g. the guest may compensate the host for food). After using the service, members can leave a noticeable reference about their host or guest.

Instead of or in addition to accommodation, members also offer to provide guide services or travel-related advice. CouchSurfing also provides editable travel guides and forums where members may seek travel partners or advice. CouchSurfing is also focused on "social networking" and members organize activities such as camping trips, bar crawls, meetings, and sporting events.

The site also features a searchable database of hundreds of upcoming events organized by CouchSurfing members, including the annual "Berlin Beach Camp" which always draws over 1,000 attendees, and the annual "WinterCamp", a New Year's Eve party hosted in a different city in Europe every year

Security verification

There are three methods to ensure security and trust, which are all visible on member profiles for potential hosts and surfers to see prior to arranging anything with each other:

Personal references, which hosts and surfers could leave for each other at their option after having used the service.

An optional credit card verification system, which allowed members to "lock in" their name and address by making a credit card payment and entering a code that CouchSurfing mails to the billing address. This also allows CS to recuperate some costs by requiring a fee for verification. For fairness the verification fee is based on a sliding scale, taking into account the Purchasing Power Parity and Human Development Index of the country of residence.

A personal vouching system, whereby a member that had been vouched for—originally starting with the founders of the site—might in turn vouch for any number of other members he or she knew or had met through CouchSurfing, and trusts.

Ambassadors

Members who wish to volunteer for various tasks on the site and help spread the word about CouchSurfing in general may become ambassadors. Ambassadors must be verified and actively promote the CouchSurfing spirit among members and to the public. In addition to promoting use of the site, they greet new members, help with questions and perform other administrative tasks, all on a volunteer basis.

Casey Fenton

The CouchSurfing project was originally conceived by Casey Fenton in 2000. According to Fenton's own account, the idea arose after finding an inexpensive flight from Boston to Iceland. Rather than stay at a hostel, Fenton randomly emailed 1500 students from the University of Iceland asking if he could stay. Fenton ultimately received more than fifty offers of accommodation. On the return flight to Boston he began to develop the ideas that would underpin the CouchSurfing project.



Site launch

Fenton developed the code intermittently over the next few years, and the site was launched with the cooperation of Dan Hoffer, Sebastien Le Tuan, and Leonardo Silveira as a beta in January, 2003. The project became a public website in January 2004.

Initial growth of the site was slow, and by the end of 2004 the site had just over 6000 members. In 2005 growth accelerated and at the end of that year the membership stood at just under 45000.

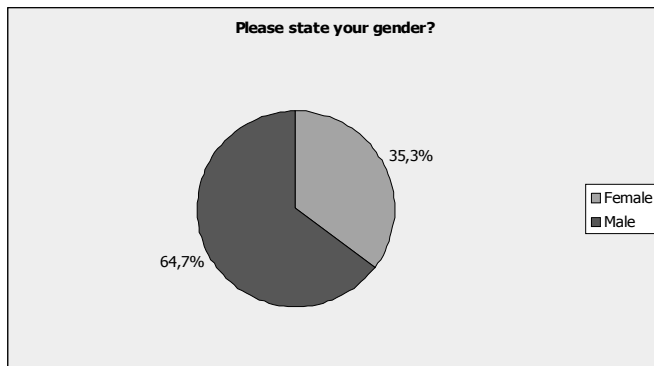
WHO USE IT

For having a best idea from who use couchsurfing an online survey was provided to users.

The data was received for five weeks, after it was recollected and the following analysis was created.

The first thing to take in consideration was the gender of people that replied to the questionnaire, the major amount was male persons.

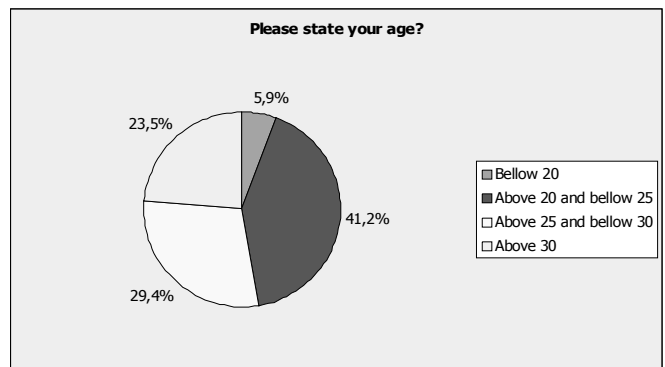
Almost two men to each woman, this is not what we usual see in couchsurfing, the major amount of person that I had contact, and that are using couchsurfing, where woman.



The second main item to characterize couchsurfers was, in my opinion, their age.

Without any surprise more than 70% of the couchsurfers were older than 20 and younger than 30.

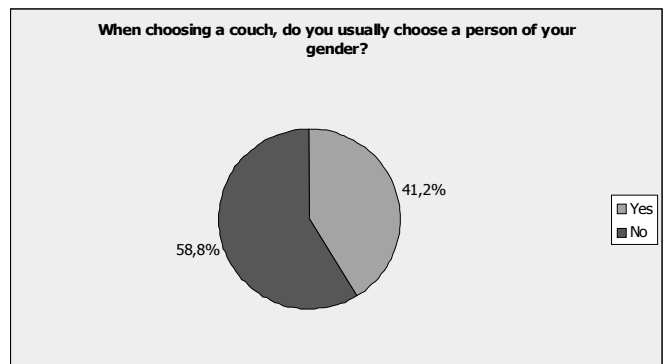
In the beginning it was a bit unexpected that 23,5% of the users were more than 30 years old, nevertheless after just a few months, and with the references in my profile, every time come more people with more age, and even with children.



After having an idea of the typical person that use couchsurfer, a man with a age between 20 and 30, I started to analyze the information and their options.

The first thing to watch was if people usually take in consideration if the person have the same gender.

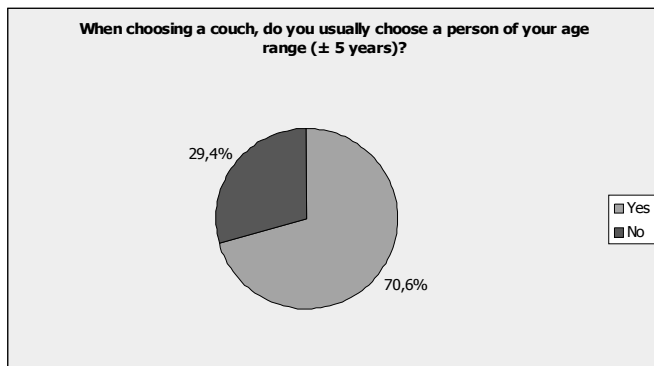
The answer weren't so surprising, the majority state that they didn't usually choose people form their gender, this was something that was also observed in my experience.



The second question related to peoples choice was if they take in consideration if the age of the host was more, or less, than 5 years of their age.

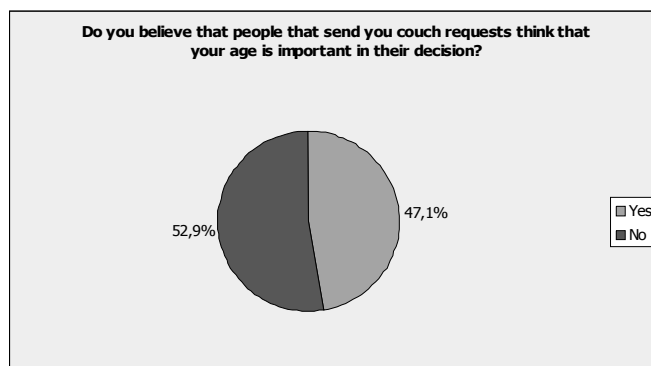
The answer weren't very surprising, nevertheless my experience show the opposite, in the first two months al the people that I hosted were at least 5 years younger than me.

With the references and the "status" also a different class of people starting making me some requests, namely more older people, the older couchsurfer that I meet was a 71 years old Canadian, and also people with families.



As a opposition to the question stated previously, regarding requests according to the age, a question regarding if couchsurfers think that there age is important in the request that they receive.

A little bit more than half of couchsurfers think that their age isn't important in received requests, in my experience this is true.



CONCLUSIONS

There are some contradictions between what CouchSurfers state and what they really choose

The are some majors contradiction: :

- 1 – The majority states that they think that people usually didn't care about their age when sending to them a CouchSurf request.
- 2 – More than 70 % state that when choosing a couch, they usually choose a person of is age range, more or less 5 years . (contradict with 1).
- 3 – All the CouchSurfers that I hosted in the first two months were outside the limits of ± 5 years (contradicts with 2).

Also the request made according to the gender is contradictory, because almost 90% the request that I receive are from the opposite gender, and also when speaking with females CouchSurfers this situation occurs, nevertheless just 58% state affirmably to the question "when choosing a couch, do you usually choose a person of your gender?"