

# How to Explain CouchSurfing's Success?<sup>1</sup>

Ildikó Dén-Nagy, Gábor Király

nagy@forte.com.pr; kiraly.gabor@pszfb.bgf.hu

**ABSTRACT:** In this paper we describe the social network of CouchSurfing as an innovative, non-monetary model for the traditional international hospitality and travel market. This paper is written to describe our understanding of how it can operate and expand in spite of potential risks and uncertainties. We present the results of an exploratory qualitative research project that was conducted in Hungary in 2012/13. The findings indicate that: (1) a high level of trust as a personality trait characterizes members; (2) trust can be interpreted as a strong cultural rule; (3) members perceive a low level of risk and have limited practical knowledge about the safety features of the system; and (4) trust towards a given member is not based on rational calculation but on emotions.

**Keywords:** Online risk, online trust, online collaboration, management of trust, CouchSurfing

## Introduction

Online social networking sites (SNS) enable the efficient maintenance and extension of relationship networks beyond the constraints of time, distance, or social groups. Furthermore, some of them can also be considered to be new ways of cooperating that offer alternatives to organizing economic activity on an unprecedented scale. In their capacity as innovative, non-monetary market models they are alternative processes for providing products or services. Instead of central operative boards of management, global communities organize their operations based on relatively simple rules. The community-based model of *'crowdfunding'* and *'crowdsourcing'* tend to supplement habitual ways of finding investors or new ideas. In the field of research and development, a similar logic is followed with so-called *'open source'* innovation networks, whose members voluntarily and cooperatively develop software, hardware and medicines without formal organizations. What these models have in common are the facts that, on the one hand, they do not usually require monetary transactions, thus participation does not lead to financial return, and on the other hand, participation is completely voluntary.

This paper examines more closely a community-based voluntary system of this kind: CouchSurfing. CouchSurfing (hereafter: CS) was launched in 2004 and in a mere 10 years the community has expanded to include 100 000 cities and 6 million users worldwide. There are more than 29 000 members in Budapest, the capital of Hungary, alone (CouchSurfing.org 2013). CS is a successful alternative

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to the traditional hospitality and tourism-related service markets, although here the vendors are not hotels or travel agencies, and customers are not conventional tourists. CS is a “global network of travelers, adventure seekers and lifelong learners”, who share their “cultures, hospitality and adventures with each other” (CouchSurfing.org, 2013). Its website connects travelers with local inhabitants who offer accommodation and other services such as acting as tourist guides or providing advice about cultural and sports programs, free of charge. In practice, this means that, in most cases, instead of hostel or hotel rooms, users called couchsurfers stay at the homes of hosts who they know only superficially, and the limited information they have about their hosts or places of accommodation is obtained through the website of the community. In turn, the hosts let community members, who they have never personally met before, stay in their homes. In this fashion, the system provides not only accommodation, catering and travel information services but has made travelling a social experience. Additionally, the website helps with event organizing, which in turn provides opportunities for group members to meet and get to know each other personally. Couchsurfers cooperate voluntarily in order to utilize the common benefits of the flexible and trustworthy system, and monetary transactions are not involved at all.

As common-sense might suggest, trustworthiness is the biggest precondition for the existence of CS. This paper is designed to illustrate how such a system can work and expand in spite of its potential risks and uncertainties. We focus especially on risk assessment and trust judgment in the context of the successful operation of the network.

The paper is structured as follows: as a point of departure it introduces the theoretical frameworks of trust that we apply throughout this paper. The following section then summarizes the empirical findings of pre-existing literature in relation to online trust and the issue of trust within CouchSurfing. In the third part, one can find a detailed account about the research project and its findings. Lastly, we discuss the main conclusions and reflect on the limitations of the project's findings.

Before we go further, we now introduce some of the basic mechanisms of CS to which we will later refer in this paper.

## Basic Definitions

This section provides a brief overview about the way CS operates and about the three trust guarantees that are provided by the system of the community.

As for the rules of participation, the CS community is relatively open: anyone who has internet access and a basic level of English can join the network. Registration only requires the construction of a public profile page on the CS website, thus barriers to entry and to becoming a member are relatively low. New members automatically become both potential service providers and users. As part of their registration

process, couchsurfers are expected to enter and publish detailed personal and hosting-related information (such as their place of residence, living circumstances, occupation, languages spoken, personal interests, or philosophy). Pictures of the registrants can also be uploaded or information about the users' hobbies, social life or their travel experiences. Additionally, the user's profile page shows the individual status of three trust guarantees: *verification*, *others' references*, and information about *vouching*.

*Verification* refers to an optional check on one's name and location by the community's administrators in exchange for payment by bank transfer of a small sum of money. This is followed by online registration (signifying that the user has been 'verified') using a personal code sent via post. This process helps members to prove that they really exist under the name and address they have provided, and enables the CS system to connect digital entities to physical persons who live in the real world.

*References* usually take the form of paragraph-long pieces of feedback about members written by other CouchSurfers who have interacted with those members as hosts or guests. References involve providing a rating (positive, negative or neutral) about the experience.

*Vouching* is also based on physical relationships (the CS website particularly emphasizes that knowing other members 'in the real world' is a minimum requirement for vouching), but it implies a higher level of trust. Vouching was designed to help foster and promote a safe network within the community. Being vouched for always signifies a one-way trust relationship and requires that three other members independently 'vouch' for an individual. The network of vouching thus develops in the form of spreading trust relations.<sup>2</sup>

## Theoretical Background

The CS system is the manifestation of a remarkable degree of trust, the concept of which deserves closer study. This paper is based on a sociological framework of trust, namely, Piotr Sztompka's account (2003). He argues that trust is linked to the unknown future and can be interpreted as a crucial strategy for dealing with uncertain and uncontrollable situations. He identifies three levels of trust: (1) at an individual level; that is, trust can be seen as a personality trait; (2) at the level of interactions, or, in other words, that trust can be understood as the quality of a relationship; and lastly, (3) at a social level where trust appears as a cultural rule. The following section briefly summarizes each of these dimensions and reflects on their relevance concerning CouchSurfing.

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<sup>2</sup> Besides these trust guarantees, the system administrators are also able to exclude problematic members whose behavior has been criticized by other members because of abusing the system.

*Trust as a personality trait*

Although trust obviously appears in the context of human interactions, the concept of trust can also be defined at the level of the individual. Sztompka argues that trust can be viewed as a personality drive, or, in other words, a basic 'trusting impulse' toward particular others or human beings in general. The existence of this personality trait can be seen as the outcome of successful socialization and grows from an intimate, caring and emotionally-secure developmental environment, which is most often one's family. So, emotional security can be considered as the very basis of any kind of trusting act (Sztompka 2003).

As far as the interrelationships of trust and the CS system are concerned, it can be argued that at this level trust plays a significant role as a personality trait. The very nature of the CS community calls for an extraordinarily high level of the trusting impulse that Sztompka writes about. This means that the 'trust threshold' for entering into the community may be rather high, thereby creating a strong selection effect. Therefore it can be presupposed that only people who are more trusting than average become members of such a community. It can be argued that people in the CS community are better at dealing with feelings of uncertainty and anxiety created by social encounters than others. Additionally, CS experiences can be characterised by their high level of risk and involve excitement, adventure and enjoyment, so it can be assumed that they attract sensation seekers and risk takers who are active in social activities (Huang et al. 2014).

One of the strategies for dealing with the challenges of social life is dealing with people that we know and whose behavior we can anticipate. In other words, "trust needs touch" (Handy 1995: 46). This is totally the opposite of what happens in a 'normal' CS transaction. CS members meet and spend time with people who they do not know and whose cultural codes and behavioral responses are often totally different and therefore cannot be anticipated or expected (Bialski 2012; Molz 2012; Chen 2012).

*Trust as the quality of the relationship*

Trust is often experienced in a specific social relationship. Sztompka points out that this relational dimension of trust is mainly covered theoretically by rational-choice theory. This theory presupposes that actors, in this context both the truster and trustee, rationally try to maximize their utilities in a transaction. Making rational calculations based on all available information is at the heart of this form of trust (Sztompka 2003: 60).

It is also noteworthy that each relationship involves a significant amount of uncertainty or risk because of the situation of incomplete information. As pieces of information might be missing about several elements of the situation, a key aspect of

the 'exchange' is that actors cannot predict the others' future actions. Therefore, the trustworthiness of the other person is a crucial aspect of the transaction and actors are motivated to gather and assimilate information about this element (Sztompka 2003: 60-63).

One can argue that, in the case of CouchSurfing, the key factors at this level are the 'memory traces' (viz. feedback) left by previous encounters (Layder 2004) that help to deal with the basic 'uncertainty about the other's trustworthiness' which is emphasized by rational-actor theorists (Becker 1986; Elster 1989). One essential function of the CS service is putting 'memory traces' online in the form of references, as described previously. Experiences of previous encounters are made visible, shared online and are accessible to all in the form of feedback written by previous hosts and guests. It could also be argued that 'memory traces' are also shared in a traditional offline community, but this sharing mostly happens verbally on a one-to-one basis. However, the 'virtual visibility' of previous experiences of CS is a very effective way of sharing and accessing these 'common memories'.

It can be hypothesized that these virtual memory traces of previous encounters help people to avoid risks and awkward situations. CS provides a service for managing a type of risk, namely, the experience of negative feelings (anxiety, uncertainty, feelings of losing control) which may be generated in social interactions by giving the opportunity for members to consider, *ex-ante*, each other's compatibility. The system and its members thereby also attempt to ensure that positive emotions are generated in future encounters.

Furthermore, these shared memory traces also have important implications from the rational-choice perspective. Because of the uncertainty about the others' future action and their trustworthiness, gathering relevant information about them is a crucial element of trust-giving.

### *Trust as a cultural rule*

Sztompka identifies the third dimension of trust 'as a cultural rule'. This dimension highlights the fact that trust is not only a dispositional characteristic and/or an outcome of rational calculations, but also a cultural phenomenon. Trust as a cultural rule can be viewed in a Durkheimian sense as a 'social fact', being the property not of individuals but of social wholes. Sztompka argues that if the rules of trust are shared in a community and are felt to be external to the actor, "then they exert a strong constraining pressure on actual acts of giving or withdrawing trust" (Sztompka 2003: 66). These normative obligations refer both to trust in others and to being and remaining trustworthy and reliable. In this sense, trust can be related to social roles and role expectations; that is, actors can presume that others will behave according to their socially and/or culturally predefined behavioral scripts.

This 'cultural rule' level is especially interesting in the case of CS since it is a hybrid

space that exists both at a virtual and a physical level. Every CS experience starts with online communication, which then can be translated into an offline setting. These settings often have more-or-less predefined roles. One function of roles is that they reduce uncertainty and anxiety in relation to a given situation by clarifying expectations. People expect others to behave and communicate in specific ways, both online and offline. With the CS service, it is easy to see this phenomenon since the host and guest relationship are laden with normative expectations. However, these expectations might differ from culture to culture, which can complicate the interaction for both hosts and guests.

The CS website also defines normative obligations for members so as to help them avoid feelings of awkwardness. These obligations cover safety-related issues like how to behave both online and offline and how and when to trust and distrust. Being aware of cultural differences indicates that two of the most important normative obligations are having respect for others and communicating clearly. Another very important normative obligation is to provide feedback on the website, which is important for the community as a whole. These relatively broad norms show that CS members have the possibility (or even the obligation) to negotiate their respective roles and expectations prior to their offline CS experiences.

It is also interesting to note that the normative obligation to trust may be especially strong in relation to the host or the guest. To balance out these 'traditional' obligations to trust, the CS website explicitly emphasizes in several places that it is 'OK' to distrust others. 'Trust your instincts' is one of first tips which is offered about safety, thus giving permission to members to be distrustful and to reject others if they feel uncomfortable about them. It is also worth mentioning that female surfers travelling solo are especially encouraged by the CS website to stay with other women or their families, and to be clear and firm about their boundaries (CouchSurfing.org 2013). All in all, the CS website defines normative expectations and the boundary conditions of trust and distrust (based on emotions and instincts) in relation to the social roles of being a host or a guest. These normative obligations to trust (or distrust) affect the CS members in particular and the community in general.

After analytically distinguishing between these different aspects of trust, the next section of the paper provides a brief but comprehensive empirical literature review of online trust structured according to this theoretical framework.

## Literature about Online Trust and CouchSurfing

Literature about the trust felt in an online environment typically concerns two common encounters: e-commerce marketplaces (where individuals or organizations carry out transactions with each other), and virtual teams (that are, by definition, online communities that have no common past or future, that are culturally diverse

and geographically disperse and that communicate electronically) (Jarvenpaa–Leidner 1999). According to the above definitions, findings about virtual teams are relevant to the study of CS, even though CS cannot be treated as a kind of typical virtual team as it is not designed to form a network of individuals for the purpose of solving a problem or participating in a production process.

As for e-commerce, not all the possible relationships are relevant here; however, the individual (i.e. Consumer-to-Consumer, C2C) buyer-seller nexus can be considered analogous to CS's host-guest relations. These situations are similar since individuals who only have virtual connections with each other at the beginning, and whose positions are asymmetrical, come into contact with each other. Although there are some differences, we refer to empirical research about e-commerce here because its findings about imperfect information, the risk of opportunism and the role of trust can be illuminating from the perspective of CS.

This section reviews literature related to online trust (i.e. the perception and maintenance of trust felt in an online context, and literature that discusses how trust affects e-commerce transactions and the operations of virtual teams) and empirical literature about trust formation and maintenance in CouchSurfing. This review section is structured according to the levels of trust defined by Sztompka.

### *Online transactions and trust as a personality trait*

According to Philip Pettit (2004), 'real' people do not manage to establish trust in one other on the basis of pure internet contact. Although his standpoint has been refuted by reality (the existence of CS is a confutation in itself), it has to be admitted that the online environment requires an extended level of trust from individuals. In the case of ICT-mediated transactions, there is a risk of technical failure as well as malicious attack, thus also the possibility of cheating and fraud (Nissenbaum 2001), and with a lack of personal encounters there comes the increased risk of opportunistic behavior (Jarvenpaa–Tractinsky 1999).

In new situations, just like when participating in e-commerce is novel to a user, people cannot rely on their past experiences. In this initial phase they can rely only on their general disposition to trust (McKnight–Chervany 2002). Research shows that the extent to which e-commerce is novel to a consumer influences their disposition to have interpersonal trust in the vendor (Gefen 2000; McKnight–Chervany 2002). Although this dispositional trust seems to be of major importance in the success of online marketplaces and communities, research usually leaves it out of consideration and pays attention to the other two levels of trust - trust as a quality of relationships and trust as a cultural rule.

### *Online transactions and trust as a quality of relationships*

In an online environment where a human interface is not available, virtual information can be an alternative means of gaining a first impression and can signal the initial level of trust that can be placed in the other party. Research shows that positive online user reviews can significantly increase the business performance of hotels (Ye et al. 2009), and that information about a person's personal identification positively affects the perceived credibility of online reviews (Xie et al. 2011).

Meents and his colleagues (2004) state, however, that virtual C2C transactions are not dyadic but rather triadic in nature because an auction-facilitating organization is also present, besides the two consumers. He refers to McKnight and Chervany (2002), who interpret the internet environment (and thus this third party) as an institution that can offer legal and technological control structures to protect participants' interests. Empirical research shows that in the case of online auction transactions, these institutional structures have a positive influence on trust (Pavlou et al. 2003).

Research also shows that people with a higher level of prior knowledge (past experience, familiarity/expertise) about a destination are less likely to use and place trust in online information (Kerstetter–Cho 2004). Although CS is an online community (it provides information online) it aggregates and publishes details about the prior experiences of its members. Our research is designed to help understand how this online knowledge base of user-generated information affects the trust of individuals and the CS community.

Web-based social networking sites also provide different (in most cases user-generated) trust-guaranteeing structures that can replace traditional strategies of establishing trust. These are third party formal controls (such as endorsement; e.g. Ryan 2004), self-disclosed profiles (Molz 2013), digital photographs (Molz 2013), trust mechanisms that build on conversations (Canfora–Visaggio 2012) or associations among members (Molz 2013), trust mechanisms that build on experiences, attitudes and behavior (e.g. voting mechanisms) and trust dissemination mechanisms (Sherchan et al. 2013). These last four guarantees are also referred to as reputation systems (Molz 2013), or memory traces (Layder 2004).

In the case of CS: (1) public profile information; (2) a voting mechanism (vouching); (3) a third party validation system (verification given by the portal); and, (4) a trust mechanism based on experience in the form of a record of members' activity (feedback) are available.

The first can be called 'personal identity'. This helps with establishing an individual's reputation and trustworthiness within the CS community (Molz 2013) and identifying similarities between users. This has also major importance in our research because, besides reputation (McKnight–Chervany 2002; Zucker 1986), homophily (Ziegler–Golbeck 2006; Golbeck 2009) can also be a basis for trust.

Although the self-disclosed information and the third-party verification seem to be the most basic of CS's trust guarantees, member-driven information may be of more importance. As Meents and his colleagues (2004) also point out, in online reputation systems the judgment of members plays a significant role (Pavlou 2002). With CS, the reputation system consists of vouching and the feedback mechanism. They provide a 'referral network' (Abdul-Rahman-Hailes 2000) within the 'trust community' (Sherchan et al. 2013) of CS at virtually no cost and they help actors to effectively assess other members' trustworthiness in the community, based only on member-generated content.

It is also worth mentioning that the virtual visibility of these memory traces offers the opportunity to sanction members. As Sztompka has argued, rational actors may also assume rationality on behalf of others (Sztompka 2003: 62) and CS members, as rational actors, may also presuppose that each member wants to maintain their use of the service in the future. In order to do so, members will not breach spoken or unspoken, written or unwritten agreements between the host and the guest. However, it is noteworthy that 'sanctioning' through feedback (i.e. giving negative feedback) is very rare in the CS community (Lauterbach et al. 2009), which is in line with experimental results in social-exchange theory (Molm 2001).

### *Trust as a cultural rule*

As cultures increasingly overlap through the internet, individuals have access to a variety of appropriate people and resources for dealing with different situations (O'Regan 2009). The other side of the coin, however, is that working on a global scale has its own disadvantages. Research shows that both e-commerce marketplaces and global virtual teams are challenged by a potential lack of trust (Bradach-Eccles 1989; Mayer et al. 1995). Besides the risk which is derived from a lack of common experience, the potential lack of an anticipated future relationship as well as the participants' cultural and geographical diversity can decrease levels of trust significantly.

The cultural background of members is relevant at another level as well. People from high trust and low trust cultures may cooperate differently online. A study by Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) shows that there can be discrepancies between different virtual teams according to their initial and later levels of trust. Teams that reported high levels of trust at the beginning and at the end of the research effort appeared to be more capable of managing uncertainty, complexity and expectations. The authors also provide evidence that communication behaviors can facilitate, maintain and strengthen trust. Moreover, they find that response behavior is as important as initiating behavior and members have to express their commitments, excitement and optimism explicitly in order to achieve a high level of trust.

Not only may the level of initial trust be different, but role expectations might

also differ from culture to culture, which might complicate interaction for both hosts and guests. These difficulties are discussed in several articles (Chen 2012; Bialski 2012; Bushberger 2012).

After summarizing the relevant findings of the pre-existing literature, in the next section of the paper we examine how members of the CS community thematize risks and trust each other and the CS system in general.

## Qualitative Research in Hungary

To explore how members perceive and utilize the system, empirical research was conducted in 2012/13 among CS users living in Hungary. Since we were interested in examining a relatively new phenomenon, and our research questions were exploratory in nature, our research design involved qualitative in-depth analysis.

### *Methodology*

25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with CS users, who were selected using the snowball sampling technique. The sample consisted of users of both sexes between the age of 20 and 35 (the most populous age group in the CS community, see the CS statistics<sup>3</sup>) who had had previous encounters with the CS system either as hosts or guests. The sample size was not defined before the research project; instead the research team looked for the point of data saturation after which conducting further interviews would have been redundant. To analyze the transcriptions of the interviews we applied a template approach (Crabtree–Miller 1999), and used NVivo data management software.

Our interviews were comprised of seven sections: introduction and conditions for joining; motivation; general trust; the role of trust from the perspective of the host; the role of trust from the perspective of the guest; exhibiting trustworthiness; and converting online trust offline. For some risk and trust-related questions we utilized research by, and adapted and rephrased interview questions from, Tran LeDieu (LeDieu 2009).

This paper mainly focuses on risk assessment and trust formation. We also reflect on our findings in the light of our expectations which are rooted in our theoretical background, and, in turn, describe the main conclusions of our research and formulate questions for further research.

### *Research questions*

Generating trust and expressing trustworthiness are at the heart of the operation and maintenance of the system. Consequently, our main research

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3 <https://www.couchsurfing.org/statistics>, 2014

questions are related to the perceived risks and the formation and maintenance of trust within CS.

Based on the applied theoretical framework we formulated the following research questions:

Q1: (trust as a personality trait): How do CS members perceive and calculate risks in relation to their CS encounters?

Q2: (trust as a quality of relationship): How do members control risks and how do they use the trust guarantees offered by the system? Which trust guarantee (reference, voucher, verification) plays the most important role in partner selection, and why?

Q3: (trust as a cultural rule): Are there any normative obligations or expectations related to trust within the community?

### *Findings*

Q1: (trust as a personality trait): How do CS members perceive and calculate risks in relation to their CS encounters?

Since prospective hosts and guests have no personal encounters before the act of couchsurfing, their general disposition to trust has importance. Our results show that a high level of trust as a personality trait characterizes the CS community, but this does not mean that the members do not consider the potential risks of their encounters. However, it was surprising that the range of risks considered proved to be very narrow, and that risks were perceived and thematized quite differently from what was expected.

The answers given by the respondents suggest that a high 'trust threshold' is needed to enter the CS community. In other words, trust should play a significant role as a personality trait, and the members' trusting impulses and their attitudes towards losing or regaining personal control are unusual. Our interviewees easily trusted in others based only on an online profile and short email conversation, without having had previous personal encounters with the other parties.

*"To sum up, neither I nor any of those people I talked to have had any negative experiences. This is due to the practice that when you accept someone as a guest you have to write about him or her, and s/he writes about you as well. If you read these references about your [prospective] guest, you can immediately decide whether s/he is trustworthy or not. This is the first thing you have to find out, and this can be clearly seen from his or her references..."*  
(Respondent Nr.5, male, 25)

*"...I don't know how safe the system is, for me it seems to be safe, and I guess, that this [CS activity] requires a high level of trust from both parties." (Respondent Nr. 16, female, 28)*

Moreover, this behavioral pattern was already characteristic of most of our interviewees from the very beginning of their membership of CS. Even those who were a bit skeptical or suspicious at first quickly gained confidence and their feelings of trust, control and security strengthened soon after their first experience. It is important to highlight the fact that Hungary is a relatively low-trust country (Dessewffy–Nagy 2013), especially compared to other European or OECD countries<sup>4</sup>. So the fact that the CS service can operate even in a relatively mistrustful social atmosphere suggests that a strong selection mechanism is at play that favors people with a strong 'trusting impulse'.

As for risk assessment as a method of control, most of the respondents reported that they do not usually estimate risks in advance in a deliberate way, except for with their very first experience. When we asked respondents to estimate the risk, they typically came up with an answer after some hesitation, as if they were surprised by the very question. One of the respondents described the following risk:

*"It can happen that a guest is mistreated because they have to be grateful to stay there [with a host]. There are some people who ask you to pay for food, because you eat too... or if you say 'sorry, this is not a good place, I don't feel good', it is harder to say 'I'll go somewhere else', because this can lead to people leaving feedback on your profile that you are irresponsible, although you had good reason to leave." (Respondent Nr. 11, female, 22)*

*"[As a host you know, that]... smaller or bigger accidents can happen, when things break or spill, but it could also happen that they [the guests] steal everything, and disappear. I have never had such an experience, but it can happen. Or it may just be that the person can be also nasty and you just cannot send him packing." (Respondent Nr. 11, female, 22)*

Surprisingly, the most frequently-mentioned risks were not related to personal safety or property damage but the risk of negative feelings and experiences arising from personal incompatibility and the potential awkwardness of a situation. Not getting along with a person can damage someone's emotional security and lead to frustration that affects self-esteem, self-confidence and self-belief. In other words, not being at ease and not being in control in unforeseen situations was one of the main concerns of the respondents.

*"I had one experience when my hospitality was misused. I told [to my guests] that I had to leave within the next few days and I needed one or two days before that to sort myself*

<sup>4</sup> According to an analysis based on Eurobarometer 2004 (Medgyesi–Tóth 2005), the general level of trust in Hungary is below the average of the EU25, but is above the average of new EU countries. If we classified EU countries into three groups based on trust, Hungary would be found in the upper segment of the lowest group.

*out and to put my thoughts in order. However, they enjoyed their stay so much, that they overstayed. It had nothing to do with CouchSurfing, but with my personality.” (Respondent Nr. 9, male, 22)*

*“The thing, which is difficult is to adapt to the other person. This also depends on the person you travel to. Since s/he is the one, who does a favour for you, it is obvious, that you try to fit in. I don’t know whether there is any risk [concerning CouchSurfing], I don’t think there is.” (Respondent Nr. 10, female, 21)*

In relation to the above findings, from the interviews it seems that being a guest is more risky than being a host because of the degree of control the hosts have in the situation: the guests are visitors in a foreign country with a foreign culture without local knowledge, thus they are relatively defenseless or vulnerable, while the hosts enjoy a ‘home turf advantage’ and can define the rules in their home. Since they are the ones who are doing a favor for the guests, this dominant regulatory position is mutually accepted. In sum, we can conclude that the effect of cultural diversity on risk assessment is asymmetrical between hosts and guests.

To sum up, it can be argued that members evaluate the risks as low; they do not consider most hypothetical risks to be real (e.g. intentional property damage, stealing, or harmful/criminal acts such as kidnapping). The very concept of risk is thematized mostly as the potential awkwardness that may occur in a social encounter and the giving up of personal control.

*Q2: (trust as a quality of relationship): How do members control risks and how do they use the trust guarantees offered by the system? Which trust guarantee (reference, voucher, verification) plays the most important role in partner selection, and why?*

Since respondents in general declared that they have high trust both toward each other and toward the CS system, interactions that create interdependence can easily come into existence. Guests and hosts alike become vulnerable in a way (mentally, financially or physically), during the period of their CS interaction, but both parties have the expectation that neither of them will misuse the situation and take advantage of the other party. The following citation illustrates how members attempt to control risks:

*“The guest has less risk and more discomfort. In theory it can happen that you apply to stay in a flat owned by Jack the Ripper who attacks you during the night, but there is a minimal chance of this. You, as the guest, have every freedom to leave whenever you want if you don’t like the host. There is a risk, of course, in living with a stranger, but if you check him out properly, this is minimal” (Respondent Nr. 2, female 34).*

Thus, the situation is the same with CS as with e-commerce and virtual teams where a human interface is not available: virtual information can be the basis for the

initial level of trust. Our interviewees widely relied on the information that could be obtained from profile pages, from personal e-mail conversations and from memory traces left by previous encounters. These online tools assist members to exercise personal control: they help avoid negative experiences and negative emotions by allowing members to select each other as guests and hosts in advance. Some respondents also reported that they trust in their own ability to handle any problems that arise, to manage conflicts or to find an alternative if their accommodation is unsatisfactory. If something does not work out as expected, both the host and the guest have the opportunity to break off the relationship. The guest can search for new accommodation via CS (or other means), while the host can ask the guest to leave her home.

*“The risks which you are able to handle yourself and on the Internet, these are manageable. It’s interesting, that there are always some risks, you can get hurt, but you can minimize these before your departure.”*

*“These CouchSurfing people are not like this [namby-pamby type of people]... they are smart. If there were something dodgy going on, they would just leave and search for a new place. These aren’t strict rules, like if you went there, you must stay there no matter what. If someone starts to get bossy, it is totally cool. If you don’t like it [the situation], you can leave.” (Respondent Nr. 10, female, 21)*

Surprisingly, most of the respondents knew hardly anything about the vouching system and the meaning of verification, and those who did regarded them as being of very little importance. Since the relational aspect of trust emphasizes information-seeking as a way to minimize uncertainty about another’s future actions, it is very surprising that people really did not know about these mechanisms or did not avail themselves of key pieces of information offered to them that could help them to assess risk and indicate whether they could trust others.

It may be assumed that CS members’ lack of knowledge about vouching and verification (although they are introduced and presented on the website in great depth) is due to the low demand for these forms of trust guarantees. Thus, although CS as an institution offers third party control over its membership (verification), it does not play the important role that we might expect. Even those who take these verification procedures into account during partner selection regard them as extra elements that have no real impact on their decisions (they merely serve to strengthen trust which has already been given in advance). This also indicates that general trust in the community as a whole is more important than any of the safety mechanisms taken separately.

Moreover, trust in the community is not necessarily abstract or theoretical. Being part of a ‘trusting community’ can in itself generate positive attachments.

The following citation shows that these kinds of emotions play a crucial role in trust formation:

*“...people need to help and trust each other. Today, people miss human relations so much, and fear for themselves, human relations have disappeared. CouchSurfing gives this back and offers hope that they [positive relationships] do exist, you just have to find them. This is why it is so good that there are these references, and if you check the profile, you feel that this is good. Maybe I was just lucky, because I have had no negative experiences, but I consider it [CouchSurfing] safe.” (Respondent Nr. 3, female, 33)*

Out of the three safety mechanisms; vouching, verification and references, the last one seems to be regarded as being most valuable. Besides references, members also study general profile information deeply. Yet many respondents emphasized that, since references are usually positive (people refrain from giving negative feedback to others, see earlier), general profile information is the main basis for partner selection.

At this point several questions arise regarding how members are able to give their trust to others if safety features seem to play only a supplementary role, how this trust is formed, and what kind of role emotions play in this process of trust giving. We now attempt to give tentative answers to these questions based on our findings.

Our research revealed that trust proves to be poorly differentiated within the community. Based on the answers we received and analyzed, we can state that unverified members, those members who have not been vouched for, and those who have fewer references, are not awarded significantly less trust. Since references are very similar to each other in terms of trust, successful encounters and the positive emotions generated by them are of less importance from the perspective of trust on an individual level than on a system level. These emotions help members to trust each other, but they help even more to generate trust in the community in general, creating a self-enhancing dynamic of trust.

*“If I read the profile I don’t try to gauge how trusting or honest but how likeable the other is. In a profile the references contain information concerning his or her trustworthiness. What you can [really] grasp from the profile is what kind of orientation s/he has to life... I can trust more in someone who I like as a person, and this is the decisive factor.” (Respondent Nr. 10, female, 21)*

*“People try to leave positive references even if those few days [spent together] weren’t 100% perfect... [You take the risk that] your personality doesn’t fit your guest’s, and you cannot stand each other. Fortunately, I haven’t had a situation like this. It can also happen that someone has a difficult personality and cannot establish a relationship from the beginning.*

*It is dangerous if you don't get along with each other, and you have to spend a week together - this can be uncomfortable.” (Respondent Nr. 3, female, 33)*

Unlike vouching or verification, detailed user profile information has major importance from the perspective of trust and partner selection. While the ‘vouching’ remains typically unnoticed, and references are mostly positive according to our interviewees, the voluntarily-provided profile information and the personal e-mails that are exchanged contain many features that generate different impressions or emotions. These emotions were called ‘intuition’ by one respondent, and the interviews show that members do not hesitate to base their decisions upon them during the selection process:

*“You get the feeling from their letters that they won't do anything bad. I am very intuitive (...) it has never really happened. I got one or two guests with whom I had nothing in common; it's normal. But this is not about trust.” (Respondent Nr. 1, female, 32)*

Q3: *(trust as a cultural rule): Are there any normative obligations or expectations related to trust within the community?*

Within CS, trust is mostly based on published information. Based on the respondents' answers we can state that providing profile information and providing feedback after transactions take place are the main tools for promoting and maintaining trust, and these activities can be considered normative obligations within the community. Members are expected to create a detailed profile page (which relates to their own trustworthiness) and write references after their experiences (about their partner's trustworthiness). Since these pieces of information are essential not only in shaping peer-to-peer trust, but general trust, this normative obligation seems very well-founded at the system level.

*“I don't like it if someone does not upload pictures or did not finish filling in his or her profile. I don't like this. I like it when there is information.” (Respondent Nr. 9, male, 22)*

*“It is important indeed to have a well-made profile. Normally. Because of course if the town and the country is indicated, and it is stated if s/he speaks English.... [but] these are still not enough. Pictures, interests [are needed to be there too].” (Respondent Nr. 12, female, 22)*

One respondent pointed out that a precise, well-written profile page says more about its owner than the knowledge that can be gained after a longer friendship. What follows from this observation is that instead of vouching or verifications, voluntarily-shared personal information plays an important role. The amount of information shared with the community and the strength of attraction felt by others may be related to each other.

Additionally, the type of information can also matter here. One interviewee, for instance, mentioned that he prefers to see members' full names as user names

instead of nicknames, and some photos about members in different contexts can also foster positive emotions and, in turn, trust. Profiles which lack information or photos can result in a lower level of trust being given in advance and result in a smaller chance of building connections.

Besides profile information, email conversations were mentioned as the most popular source of trust. While in the case of profiles the volume of information seems to be critical, with email communication normative expectations are more stylistic. An open-minded, cheerful email generates positive emotions with a higher likelihood of reply, while an uncommunicative, impersonal, template-like or 'sullen' email is usually not welcomed. Based on our interviews we can state that here it is not the content itself but the style of communication that matters. The way one phrases his wishes and preferences regarding accommodation or opinions can generate positive emotions, like feelings of attraction. These preferred stylistic features of virtual communication can differ from culture to culture; however, investigating this topic exceeds the limits of this study. Hosts expect prospective guests to send personal emails which are personally addressed to them based on their profile information.

*"Those, who write mail like this: 'hi', and not even able to write down your name, their messages are immediately thrown into trash." (Respondent Nr. 5, male, 25)*

In other words, there is a normative obligation in the CS community that people should seek to create common experiences and quality shared time based on similar interests, values or philosophies. Consequently, people who 'only' attempt to find a place to stay by sending several impersonal emails to potential hosts are sanctioned by the community.

What we can state based on the interviews is that positive emotions and trust are closely related. When we asked members about trust they often answered by referencing other emotions like feelings of empathy or friendship, or in terms of group-belonging. This supports the notion of the importance of virtual self-representation that is shown by members' profile pages. The answers we collected reflect the fact that emotions are more important than rational calculation. During the phase of personal encounters a feeling of greater trust was usually described as 'talking a lot with each other' and 'becoming friends'. Evidence of the existence of homophilic preferences during partner selection can also be inferred from our respondents. Homophily seems to have a strong impact with regard to personal interests and age, while cultural diversity might be referred to as a preference.

## Discussion and Limitations

As a community-based, non-monetary alternative to the traditional hospitality market, CouchSurfing offers many lessons in connection with hospitality-related

risk assessment and trust formation. First of all, the biggest perceived risk of couchsurfing is not physical or material but emotional. Travelling always means having some sort of emotional experience, and, surprisingly, the relatively higher probability of minor situational inconveniences is considered more disturbing to individual CS members than the (relatively smaller) risk of suffering serious physical or material damage. Secondly, the trust guarantees offered by the system contribute to trust formation much less than communication among members does. It is also characteristic that, within online communities like CS, the provision of user-generated personal information is of greater importance than any impersonal third party guarantees. Thirdly, the self-representation of individuals is of key significance within the community in terms of trust formation. Those members who consciously make more effort to enhance their self-representation may be more popular because they prove to be more trustworthy. Here the quality and the quantity of shared information both matter. Finally, our research shows that virtual trust communities such as CS can only work if there is a strong normative obligation towards members to share certain information with the community, and to have a particular mindset and set of values as far as travelling is concerned.

In summary, we can state that, within CS, trust depends on the perceived risk, on the shared personal information of the members and on information provided by the system. As far as risk assessment and trust formation are concerned, members rely on shared personal profile information much more than any system-based information or safety mechanisms 'wired into' the network.

However, it is also possible to question the interpretation of the findings in this paper and offer an alternative explication. As David and Pinch (2008) show, reputation systems can be easily abused for financial gains or to earn a higher position in a social ranking system. So it is also possible that users are aware that references cannot be totally trusted since they can be manufactured artificially or that people very rarely give each other negative ratings in public ranking systems (Molm 2001). In a similar manner, 'vouching' can also be misused in order to seem trustworthy without being so. Consequently, it is possible that CS users turn to public profiles as a genuine source of information since all other trust mechanisms can be manipulated.

Although, this exploratory research project cannot decisively refute this alternative explanation, the authors of this paper do not consider this type of interpretation valid. There are several reasons for this.

It can be claimed that it is much easier to abuse personal profile information (or play a role in emails) to gain the confidence of others than to trick the safety mechanisms of the CS system. So if users were truly rational decision-makers concerning CS data, they should also have their doubts about information on personal profiles or written in emails.

Moreover, since verification of one's identity requires a personal bank card, it is a much more trustworthy safety mechanism than other trust guarantees (references,

vouching). If users wanted information they should rely on, they should have utilized information on verification more often compared to other safety mechanisms or other personalized data. This is not the case according to the findings of this paper.

Lastly, if users ignored some sources of information because they are unreliable that would have been the result of a conscious decision-making process assessing the reliability of different sources. The answers in the interviews demonstrated that users are seriously underinformed about safety mechanisms offered by the Couchsurfing system in general. They rely on personal information because this provides them much more meaningful information than those data which allow for a more rational decision-making path.

While this qualitative research project was designed to provide deeper insight into the problem of trust within CS, it also has some limitations. First of all, the research context involves a single large Eastern European city: Budapest. Although not all the respondents were Hungarian, using a different sample that has a different cultural composition might lead to different findings. Whether or not the results are generalizable to the whole CS community requires further investigation. Extended, international comparative research would make intercultural comparison possible.

Secondly, although this qualitative study provides deeper insight into the research questions, quantitative large scale research could enhance the validity of our findings.

Thirdly, the results of this research leave us unable to draw conclusions about the dynamics of trust, to understand how trust or distrust diffuses within the community or to know whether there are characteristics of the network that influence the diffusion of trust significantly. These questions might be answered using social network analysis methodologies and agent-based simulations.

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