

Chapter 8

From Online Familiarity to Offline Trust

How a Virtual Community Creates Familiarity and Trust between Strangers

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Hospitality networks are Internet-based social networks of hundreds of thousands of individuals who use an online space to search out accommodation in the home of another network member. Instead of staying at a hotel or hostel, the

members of this virtual community prefer to encounter individuals online who are willing to host them in their home. Additionally, users may be motivated to engage in the hospitality network not to travel but to host members from various parts of the world. Other users simply enjoy meeting other network members for a coffee or a tour of a new city. These are networks in which interaction between members originates online with the purpose of meeting offline. Couchsurfing.com is the largest community, with nearly 1 million members globally.

As we will see, trust is central to this community, and trust, as well as the question of trustworthiness, is made very explicit through the design of the Web site. The initial question that instigated the three years of fieldwork with this community was How does trust develop on this sort of Web site? What enables strangers to trust one another, and how is it possible that a community enables trust between users both online and offline? After speaking to over thirty community members, conducting an online survey (which reaped around three thousand respondents), sleeping on couches, floors, and mattresses from Montreal to Stockholm, and hosting over thirty Couchsurfers, we came to the realization that trust is multicausal and is dependent on a user's perception of familiarity. It was Luhmann who believed that "Trust has to be achieved within a familiar world ... we cannot neglect the conditions of familiarity and its limits when we set out to explore the conditions of trust" (Luhmann 1979). The central question in this chapter is how does a virtual community such as Couchsurfing.com create this "familiar world," which then creates trust between users? We will tackle this question by explaining that trust emerges in the following stages:

- (a) First, individual predispositions enable a person to relate to the purpose of a given online community. Only those who relate to Couchsurfing.com and its purpose—hosting or visiting strangers in one's home—join the Web site and use it actively. Thus, a process of self-selection occurs, and Couchsurfing users usually have a more open approach to trust than those users who would not join such a Web site.
- (b) Trust is also established through navigation through the online profile, which allows a user to become familiar with another user. The most important elements of a profile are a user's self-presentation and the recommendation system where other users rate their relation and experiences with the user as a host/guest. This user's self-presentation enables others to create a sense of similarity with them, which facilitates the emergence of trust through the mechanism of homophily. The opinions of others in the recommendation system also influences the trustworthiness of a user.
- (c) Finally, trust is strengthened during offline contact, during interaction within a user's home while couchsurfing.

To help us explain these processes, Dieberger (2003) introduced a useful concept called social navigation. A much broader concept than recommendation systems,

the “goal of social navigation is to utilize information about other people’s behavior for our own navigational decisions (p. 35).” As we will see, Couchsurfing serves as an example of a space where users must create a sense of familiarity with other users in order to trust them enough to agree to hosting or visiting them. This chapter argues that users gain a sense of familiarity through social navigation, moving through information about other users based on their personal profiles. But in order to understand how a virtual community creates this “familiar world,” we must take into account both how a user socially navigates through a Web site like Couchsurfing and how the Web site is designed in order to enable users to better communicate familiarity between one another. Thus, in addition to the process of social navigation, in this chapter we will discuss the design, or affordances—properties of the environment that offer actions to those wanting to function within the environment (Gibson 1979), offered by Couchsurfing.

In specifically focusing on the way a virtual community fosters trust among its members, this chapter will provide an ethnographic account of this online–offline hospitality network. Couchsurfing is a community of trustful relationships between strangers—ones where interaction moves from the virtual to the corporeal world. Ethnographic description will be employed in order to understand the microprocesses that help create familiarity between users using Garfinkel’s concept of “perceivedly normal environments,” which he believes is related to trust. “To say that one person ‘trusts’ another means that the person seeks to act in such a fashion as to produce through his action or to respect as conditions of play actual events that accord with normative orders of events depicted in the basic rules of play.” (Garfinkel 1963, p. 193). Thus, to understand the way trust is formed, we will take into account.

- (a) the affordances for interaction made by the Couchsurfing Web site,
- (b) the way the user socially navigates through the online world and offline world,
- (c) the “rules of play,” which cement themselves as normative patterns of interaction within this virtual community, creating a “perceivedly normal environment.”

This description will move from the moment a new member is introduced to the virtual community to the stage of complete immersion. The practice of Couchsurfing will also be outlined in order to understand how a sense of familiarity is created and how trust is then embodied and exchanged in both an online and then offline setting. The description will be narrated by using one user—a woman from Finland—who will serve as a representation and at times a conglomeration of the experiences expressed to us by Couchsurfers interviewed. By describing her experiences, we present an individual who, in our opinion, expresses the actions and opinions of a typical Couchsurfer. Nana experiences, as well as the other interviews featured here, were conducted throughout the course of our three-year study of the Web site. Most of the interviews took place in Montreal between July and August 2006 among Couchsurfers who had been actively hosting or visiting other

members of the community. Some community and Web site statistics, collected in November 2008, which are provided to the public through Couchsurfing.com will also be used. Additionally, we will draw certain information from our own online survey, which was conducted between August 2006 and March 2007. This online survey was programmed into the Web site and was made available to users through their individual profiles by adding an extra tab named “My Survey” onto their profile.

8.1 Inside Couchsurfing

The knowledge of an online community such as Couchsurfing often travels in two ways: first, through the media, and second, through one’s personal network, often through weak-ties (Granovetter 1973), such as, acquaintances and people we meet through casual meetings, meetings-in-flux, and in public spaces, such as, airports, hostels, bars, and sports clubs. Couchsurfing.com is a talking piece. It is a community of individuals who use the online social networking Web site in order to find accommodation in the homes of other members of the network. It is quirky. It sounds risky. It seems like something your mother would disapprove of. If you have not heard of Couchsurfing, you will certainly want to hear about it. It has slowly entered the small talk of the rich, northern societies—an icebreaker, a piece of small talk, a note for the back page of a lifestyle magazine.

Nana is an information technology (IT) consultant from Helsinki. She likes her job, she earns enough money to live comfortably, and she is still in her late twenties. She likes meeting new people but complains that she cannot really find anyone to “connect with.” “The Finnish are quite closed people,” she explains. One day after work, she goes to a pub with some of her colleagues. She knows three out of five of the other people. A friend of a friend starts telling them a “funny story” about his last city break to Berlin, where he went “Couchsurfing.” Some have vaguely heard of Couchsurfing, also through word of mouth, through friends of friends, or through loose ties. The new acquaintance begins to explain the nature of the community. Instead of staying at a hotel or a hostel, he stayed on somebody’s couch. The group gets excited. This idea seems too good to be true. Questions and skepticism start flying. Did you know them? No. So they were complete strangers? Yes. Weren’t you scared that they would hurt you? Not really. Why? Why aren’t you afraid? Nana does not say anything and listens to the questions. She is not afraid of the idea. The concept intrigues her. A cheap place to stay. The feeling of home in a foreign place. And insider’s view on a place. This is so simple; why hasn’t anyone thought of this earlier, she asks herself. Nana is like most Couchsurfers we interviewed—they feel differentiated; they define themselves as people who follow a different set of rules; they believe that “Couchsurfing is not all that radical, it’s just different.” A 52-year-old woman Couchsurfer explained that “Couchsurfing is a community. People on

the same wavelength, people who maybe have the same political views, the same views of the world, the same views of friendship, the same views of trust, and the same views of travel.” This is symptomatic of all those who join the community—they just “get it.” To a certain degree, not everyone can be a Couchsurfer. Despite the fact that membership is open to everyone, users usually have certain individual predispositions: they must be able to accept the Couchsurfing ideology, including an openness to people they do not know. Moreover, they must believe that people are inherently good natured. This process of self-selection to Couchsurfing makes the emergence of trust between members of this community much easier.

Couchsurfers who engage in the community are looked at as outsiders to the rest of society, and they do not mind being outsiders, being “different.” The idea of Couchsurfing, much like Nana experienced among her acquaintances in the pub, is often rejected, thought of as *strange*. But Nana wants to “expand,” wants to be different, wants to be “strange” because she is not satisfied with the status quo. Another Couchsurfer explained the people around him in Holland as “being so static, as they are, they didn’t get out. Even though we spent all these years together as friends, drinking together, or whatever, they still stay static; they’re still in the same place, mentally too.” This sense of being static, of immobility, is exactly what many Couchsurfers wish to break free from. Michael, a twenty-eight-year-old American stated, “People are quick to take things that they don’t understand or are very different to them and just kind of push them off. And I think Couchsurfing gets that, wanting to expand relationships in a more free way.” For Michael, this is a freeing, liberating practice. The understanding among Couchsurfers is that while “mainstream” society associates interaction with strangers as something involving risk. Couchsurfing as a practice adheres to its own set of rules of friendship and familiarization—and Couchsurfers perceive this to be an alternative to the mainstream. The users express relief at the “ease” in communication with other Web site members and the “common understanding” that generates a sense of closeness. Nana stated that communication is “easier with Couchsurfers because there is some common element, some kind of spirit that combines you, that’s not seen around the people I’m usually around in my place ... Couchsurfing is a heightened reality.”

That being said, Couchsurfers are often drawn to the idea out of either an understanding of the practice (i.e., they have created informal networks of hospitality where they used to stay on the couches of friends of friends or hosted people they met in a pub or at a party) or a desire to engage in a practice that promises an alternative to the risk society (Beck 1992) under an individualistic, consumer capitalism—it is an utopian altruism. In other words, those like Nana who first hear and wish to engage in the practice desire to *become trustworthy*, and Couchsurfing is their ticket to engage in such a practice. This desire is created as a dichotomy to the social reality of a risk society. As Nana stated, it becomes the heightened reality—one where trust between individuals is the norm, not the exception. Self-disclosure and openness create a level of psychological risk, yet members of this community create an illusion of close disclosure by building up trust between each other. Trust

allows users to create closer relationships despite the risks involved. Human relations are not purely symbolic as Baudrillard explained (1994), a simulation of something real; here they are real—they are face to face, tangible, intense, and they promise intensity. Moreover, although we could come to the conclusion that Nana wanted to become part of Couchsurfing because she has the time, financial resources, and accommodation to host another individual, this is not often the case. Couchsurfers have many faces. They can be families, single men living in bachelor apartments, young mothers, students living in residence, or farmers. Calling “Couchsurfing” by its name is deceptive—visitors sleep in tents, on the floor, on blow-up mattresses, on children’s beds (the children then sleep with their parents), in a barn, or sometimes share a bed with the host. Thus, the individual’s lifestyle is irrelevant. If a person individual is interested in the idea of Couchsurfing, she will arrange her life around the practice. The main slogan that appears on the Web site is a call to “Participate in creating a better world—one couch at a time.” So in order for Nana to become engaged in the Web site, she must identify herself with the ideology behind it. The bare-bones structure of this type of exchange promises new users a cheap way to travel—a free couch. Yet Couchsurfing aims to weed out this type of utilitarianism and provide instead an ideology with a free couch: “This is not just a free couch. This promises intense, frequent, diverse interactions,” stated the founder of the Web site. When Nana has identified with the ideology, she will expect that the practice that the Web site promotes is interesting, good, safe, something she also wants to engage in. Another Couchsurfer stated that by being a member, he “looks forward to lots of enriching experiences, stimulating conversations and fascinating people.” This expectation of a worthwhile venture is, in essence, a trust that this practice is functional. Specifically, one trusts that through Couchsurfing, one will indeed find “fascinating conversations” and “stimulating people.” It is the ideological promise of a better reality that this given online community expresses that drives one’s desire to become a member.

8.2 Online Community Ideology

When a community shares common ideals or goals, a basic level of trust is always present. Lewis and Weigert identified this type of trust as a “social reality.” As such, individual’s interactions with other community members cannot be simply construed as being trustworthy or not. Specifically, within a community, individuals are not faced with the hyperbolic extremes of “trust” and the “absence of trust,” decisions that are cognitive and present outside of such a community. In groups for which trust exists as a social reality, interpersonal trust comes naturally and is not reducible to individual psychology (Lewis and Weigert 1985). Couchsurfing is based on a common purpose and ideology, where members believe that opening up one’s home to strangers will provide various cultural, educational, and self-reflective benefits. What is also worth noting is that trustfulness becomes a mandatory

practice in order to become part of this community. In other words, you cannot be a Couchsurfer if you do not want to trust another person enough to let him into your own home, your own private space.

Nana adheres to this ideology. She does not care if a “stranger” sits on her sofa. Her sofa is disposable, the experience is lasting. She is attracted to the experiences that the membership to this privileged community will potentially provide her—the chance to interact with new people, the chance to be open with others, the chance to share. The new sights, the new smells of entering a stranger’s private space attract her, as well as the chance to travel to places too expensive for her. A single mother in her early thirties living in Leipzig mentioned that Couchsurfing is attractive because it allows people into the “private sphere [which] has all sorts of emotions attached to it. And when I share that space with someone, it just feels more natural to be emotional and honest, and have an honest discussion. Outside, we have small talk. And small talk is not me, it’s not about me. It’s about nothing. But these discussions are anonymous because the surroundings, too, are anonymous.” These are all new chances, new experiences, something she desired to live through.

Among her group of friend in the pub, Nana cannot articulate why she does not think Couchsurfing is a bad idea. She just writes down the URL (uniform resource locator, i.e., the Web site’s address), and they move to another topic. Because Nana identifies with the community’s ideology, she does not experience a sense of risk or discomfort when introduced to the idea. This is the first mechanism of trust that allows this community to function; trust is a social reality, part of the ideology and practice of the community.

The desire to be part of this utopian ideal, or the urgency that this sort of utopianism exists and one is not part of it, drives the new member to join the community soon after they first hear about it. Nana is now logging onto Couchsurfing. Although earlier I mentioned that the living patterns of Couchsurfers vary, those who gain the desire to join the Web site must first have an understanding of what a virtual community is and how it functions, and, quite basically, they must be able to log onto a Web site. Those who desire to join Couchsurfing must understand and trust the system that is the Internet. Without already holding a narrative of the Internet, the belief in the functionality of this type of virtual community is impossible.

8.3 Creating an Online Profile

The process of self-presentation online is an important aspect in relational development offline. Couchsurfers must establish an online profile of themselves, and this profile communicates information about oneself that is crucial in creating a sense of knowledge about the other person, which influences familiarity. These features in the profile are what we will call “affordances”—properties of the environment that offer actions to appropriate organisms (Gaver 1992). The Couchsurfing profile offers certain affordances that will be discussed, which influence the way a user

is perceived by other community members. The profile also plays a crucial role in a user's social navigation through the Web site, when she chooses whom to initiate contact with. Goffman's work on self-presentation explains that certain individuals may engage in strategic activities "to convey an impression to others which it is in [their] interests to convey" (Goffman 1959). As the average age of Couchsurfers is twenty-seven, and 70% of users are from Europe or North America, most new Couchsurfers are like Nana: They have a high level of media literacy and are proficient at navigating through Web sites. It takes her a matter of minutes to register her profile. Communicating trust is linked to the way we communicate "self" to another user—directly helping the other to familiarize himself with who we are. This virtual community provides a number of affordances for its members to communicate a sense of trustworthiness to another community member. Nana fills in a variety of boxes that ask for her "personal interests" and "life approach." She types in that she likes Finnish literature. Her interests are "strange lands and languages." Couchsurfing asks her to fill in her "current mission." She writes: "To have brand new adventures." She is asked to explain the "types of people she enjoys." She writes: "Seekers. People who are curious, creative, laid back, insightful without being pretentious and intelligent without being arrogant about it. Those who prefer shaking the world with their thoughts rather than just making noises."

These profile questions are crucial in yet another mechanism that promotes trust within this virtual community—communicating a sense of familiarity. Dan, one of the founders of the Web site, explained that the profile questions are structured in such a way that "it brings out the essence of people. And when people's essences are visible, it contributes to the building of trust." This makes us assume that (1) trust is dependent on the level of self-disclosure, and (2) trust is dependent on the levels of homophily (similarity) between users. Therefore, if a virtual community like Couchsurfing wishes to create trusting virtual relationships, it must provide enough space for the user to disclose who they are to the rest of the community. When someone like Nana builds her first profile, a Web page flashes in front of her, suggesting that the more information a user provides, the more trustworthy she will appear to other users. The Web site also suggests providing some personal description. In doing so, "those viewing your profile get a better idea of who you are. This helps others understand who you are based on the content of what you write, and also how you write it."

According to Web site statistics, 60.1% of the members present photos, and most active members have a number of photos attached to their profile. Profiles with text and no photos can be considered less trustworthy, and users are encouraged to post a photo online in order to get better feedback. One of the main aspects, which make Couchsurfing distinct from all other Web sites of its sort, is its high use of photo images. Unlike other virtual communities like Facebook, the photos attached to the profile must be actual likenesses of the members themselves. And although this does not guarantee that a member will not use somebody else's

headshot, photos of celebrities, animals, or objects are never used and are deleted by the Web site administrators.

Couchsurfing also features a “buddy list” or a “friendship list.” Every profile shows a list of other members that the given person knows. As an example of how the friend list works, let us consider the profile of Andrew in Warsaw, Poland. He has over 180 friends linked to his profile, and most of them are people he has strictly surfed or hosted, although they also include high school friends, university friends, and family members. Every time somebody clicks on Andrew’s profile, they can look at all of Andrew’s friends, and all their “references” for Andrew as well as their “link strength” (which we will explain in detail below.) By using simple common sense, a user will come to the conclusion that somebody with many friends is, in fact, more likely to be trustworthy. It is also worth mentioning here that the type of person one is friends with matters just as much as the number of friends one has. For example, a person who has all of the Web site administrators and a few ambassadors as their friends could also be considered more trustworthy.

Members who become very involved in the development of the Couchsurfing project, want to help promotion of Couchsurfing, or are highly active surfers and hosts have the potential of becoming a Couchsurfing “ambassador.” The ambassador’s job comes in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes an ambassador can help translate the Web site into a new language or send “greetings” to new members. The title of “ambassador” is given to a surfer by members of the administrative team, which is a collective of individuals who helped found and develop the Web site. The fact that a person is an ambassador, or a founding member, has the potential to make him more trustworthy.

Each member has the opportunity to enter the process of vouching. One member can “vouch” for another member by clicking on an icon next to her profile. In doing this, one member makes a sort of promise to the rest of the Couchsurfing community that the member they are vouching for is, in fact, trustworthy. Often people can vouch for their good friends or for people they have hosted or surfed with. New users like Nana obviously cannot vouch for anyone if they do not have anybody linked to their profile. Vouching implies that you have been a member for some time.

Verification is something slightly different from vouching and involves a four-step process in which a member sends his credit card number to the members of the administrative team, the founder of the Web site. The members of the administrative team in charge of verification then take \$25 U.S. from the member’s account (there are discounts for those who cannot afford the fee.) Upon payment, the user is sent a verification number to her home address. The member enters the number onto the Web site and receives the full level of verification. Verification guarantees others that this member lives at the address indicated on the Web site and that her identity is correct. The downfall of this process is that it excludes those without a credit card and financial means to pay for it. Verification is not a requirement of the Web site, and many members visit or host other users without it.

Relationships on Couchsurfing are recorded with a set of variables and descriptions, meaning, when Nana adds a friend to her “friendship list,” she must answer a set of questions about this friend. These questions are based on the origin and duration of the relationship. From a drop-down menu, the user chooses from a list of thirteen answers about the relationship origin. Nana would also have to explain how strongly she trusts the friend and would have a choice of six text-based answers that range from “I don’t know this person well enough to decide” to “I would trust this person with my life” (other answers include “I don’t trust this person,” “I trust this person somewhat,” “I generally trust this person,” and “I highly trust this person.”) This friendship list is an indicator of how popular an individual is and, through the “trust strength,” she gains information on how reputable (and hence, trustworthy), she is.

The final feature, and one of the most important on Couchsurfing explicitly relating to trust, is the reference system, which is similar to online auction Web sites like Ebay.com, where a user is given a positive/negative rating from people who have interacted with him either through hosting or visiting, or elsewhere. This feature functions in addition to the friendship list, and under any Couchsurfer’s profile there can appear a list of references from old school friends, family members, or former hosts and guests. Note that a reference is usually left by someone whom we have met and interacted with face to face, over a period of time. One of Nana’s references written by her former host was

Another Couchsurfing enthu(slastic) person. [Nana] is one of the first people I hosted through Couch surfing ... hosted her in Bombay with her friends from England, then met up with her in Goa and traveled a bit together and again hosted her at my place ... It would be funny if [Nana] wrote a mail asking me whether she can surf my couch ... she has become family now ... the wanderer spirit in her and in me will ensure that we meet some day in some corner of this not so lonely planet and I am really looking forward to it.

None of the received references can be deleted by the user, and some profiles include negative references. According to Web site statistics, 99.8% of experiences are positive, but the negative experiences are also posted on a user’s profile. These references are textual and depend on the detail; a lot of information is contained in the descriptive opinion of each user. The level of enthusiasm can differ from user to user. The meaning in these references cannot be understood by reading just the “positive” or “negative” rating, yet rather by reading the detailed description of the author. Knowledge of this reference feature may also implicitly encourage community members to be good hosts or guests during the offline interaction so that they may gain a positive reference and, hence, a positive reputation online.

In general, the profile serves as an introduction, and Couchsurfing acts as the mediator in this introduction, helping acquaint one person with another, offering

various affordances within the profile by which a member can communicate who they are. Yet this is not a regular “acquaintance” in the traditional sense of the word. Georg Simmel, who wrote extensively on the subject of socialization and interaction, believed that mutual “acquaintance by no means is knowledge of one another; it involves no actual insight into the individual nature of the personality. It only means that one has taken notice of the other’s existence, as it were” (Simmel 1949, p. 320). Yet, Simmel, writing at a time when online socialization was nonexistent, did not take into account the virtual phenomenon of online profiles—when strangers could gain information about one another through their online identities and, before meeting each other in person, create an illusion of closeness and familiarity. In order to relate this to the process of social navigation, let us consider that just as “The number of cars parked in front of a restaurant is an indication of its popularity as is the length of the waiting line before a theatre” (Dieberger 1997, p. 807), the number of photos, friends, references, travel experiences, etc. can have a deep impact on the way in which we perceive another user, as we will see in the following paragraphs.

8.4 Choosing Whom to Trust

After Nana builds her profile, she searches couches to stay on. Nana wants to visit Sweden for the weekend. She types “Stockholm” into the search engine, and thirteen pages showing twenty-five users per page appear. These profiles are smaller versions of the larger profiles and include information such as the user’s photo, her age, gender, location, date of last login, languages spoken, hobbies, and “philosophy,” which is a short sentence describing the user’s approach to life. The number of photos and friends and her email response rate are also shown.

Despite Nana’s sense of trust in the ideology of Couchsurfing, some first-time users want to understand how to communicate trust online. A section of the Web site is devoted to answering questions regarding first-time interaction between potential host and guest. The following is an extract from a page found on the Web site, outlining the precautions new Couchsurfers should take when hosting or surfing.

When you receive a Couch Request, try to get an idea of who is writing to you. Is it clear that they have read your profile? Are they interested in meeting YOU, or does it seem like they are just looking for a free place to stay? Who are your Surfers? A profile can give you valuable information about a person, so first find out what kind of people will surf your couch! Read the profile carefully. Is their profile filled out? Do they have photographs? Who left them references? How much CouchSurfing experience do they have? Did that glowing reference come from someone who hosted or surfed with this person? (Couchsurfing.com, October 17, 2008).

The fields that are filled in by each user not only allow Nana to familiarize herself with another user but also allow her to discern whether or not the other user would be a person she wishes to interact with. This decision is quite subjective and often based on homophily—or an attraction to those who are similar to Nana. Among all the users in Stockholm, Nana found a woman her age who, like her, is interested in creative, adventurous, and open-minded people. Similarity instantly connects Nana to this stranger, and in this case, this sense of connection is based on the stranger's perceived worldview. This user in Stockholm has now shifted from being a stranger to being a familiar, like-minded individual—all before any verbal dialogue was exchanged. The design of Couchsurfing enabled this connection to take place.

Despite the range in demographic profiles, as Nana logs into her account and chooses a couch to stay on, she will be more likely to visit someone who has the greatest similarity to her. Ziegler and Golbeck (2007) explained that dependencies between user similarity and trust exist when the community's trust network revolves around a common goal or particular application and when the individuals trusting each other share similar interests or traits. Trust, therefore, is positively related to homophily. Let us take into consideration an analysis carried out on 221,180 friendship dyads registered on Couchsurfing in February 2006, which includes various variables such as the origin and the duration of acquaintanceship as well as how strongly the individuals trust one another on a scale of 1 to 6. In Figure 8.1, we notice that for all factors, trust is significantly higher within homophilous relations than within heterogeneous ones. For example, the more similar the dyads are in age (no more than a two-year age difference), the more likely they are to trust each other. Specifically, it is evident that if the dyads are of exactly the same age, they are more likely to highly trust each other. 23% of same-age dyads gave each other the highest possible degree of trust, compared to 17.9% of similar age dyads and only 8.8% for dyads with a more than two-year age difference.

A higher tendency toward trust is within homophilous relationships according to age and country of origin, and a slightly lower tendency toward trust is found in same-gender relationships. The same city homophily analysis shows those dyads who know each other from an offline setting. We therefore are not able to decide whether the observed result is an effect of homophily or an effect of the context of a given relationship. These dyads might have had more opportunity to strengthen their relationship offline, in a variety of contexts, compared to other relations who only know each other through the Couchsurfing system. However same-country dyads can, and within our study do, show a tendency for homophily. Our results show that if dyads share the same country of origin, they are more likely to trust each other. This can be linked to a feeling of national identity or the perception of gaining a common understanding that can be linked to a lower sense of risk that facilitates higher trust. Therefore, we can state that people in homophilous relationships tend to trust each other more than those in heterogeneous relationships.

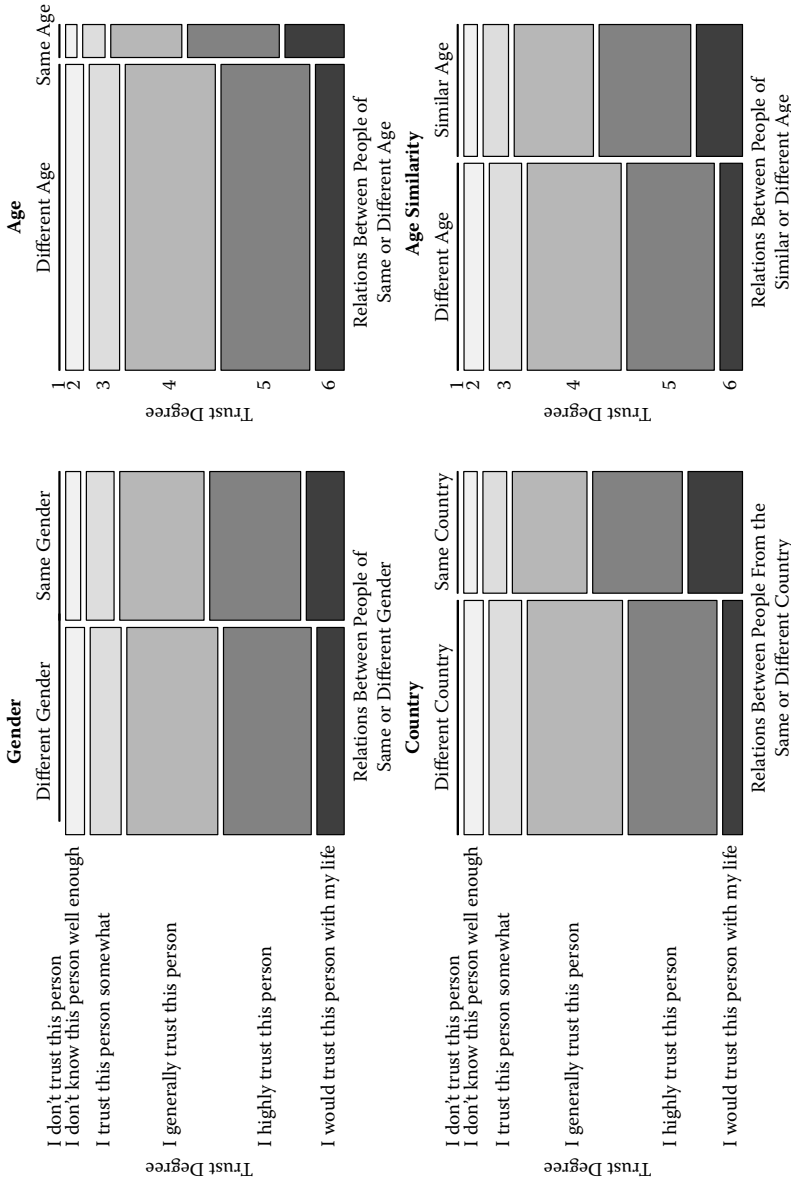


Figure 8.1 The impact of similarity of gender, age, and country of origin on levels of trust (the width of bars is proportional to the number of relations of each category.)

8.5 Making First Contact

Once Nana has found someone she would like to visit, she sends him an email through the messaging system that is built into the Web site. This message is forwarded to the user's regular email provider; yet the actual email address of any user is not shown on the Web site. It is not guaranteed that the first person Nana chooses will accept her as a visitor. Those who receive email requests to Couchsurf may not respond to the request for a variety of reasons: Sometimes, the user may not have any free time to host a visitor that specific weekend. They may already have other Couchsurfing guests, or any other guests, staying with them on the weekend Nana requested. Another reason is that they may not have the energy, or the will to host, as hosting can sometimes be quite time consuming and can also take the host away from their daily routine. Other reasons, which have more to do with the user requesting to visit than with the individual hosting, is that the potential host may not want to host the person sending the request. This may be for a variety of reasons, but he comes to reject a request after socially navigating through the user's profile and after reading her request email. Moreover, the host may reject the user for something that has little to do with trust: The potential host may feel that this potential visitor is not interesting or compatible with her. The profile, which served as a partial representation of the individual, provides information that helps the host or guest come to a cognitive conclusion regarding who he is as a person. Although the amount of honesty in self-presentation online is questionable and has been studied elsewhere, what we can say is that the online profile is the only method the users have to familiarize one another with who they are prior to deciding to meet one another. So, if one user does gain a sense of familiarity with another user after reading her profile, she does not necessarily have to like the person she has come to be familiar with. Familiarity does not always have to be positive. We must not overlook the fact that Couchsurfers do not always accept one another into each other's homes. Thus, this sense of familiarity is divided into two categories: one, the host can look at a profile, think that it is incomplete (has no photos, little information), and reject the request to host the guest; and two, the host can look at a profile, think that there is quite a lot of information, but that the person himself does not seem to be her "type of people." Emails requesting a couch are often sent out to a number of people in a given city. Many respondents and friends have expressed having difficulty finding accommodation in certain cities. Among all the reasons provided above, this also has to do with the time of travel as well as the number of Couchsurfers in a given city. Yet Couchsurfers have expressed the sense that Couchsurfing is about choice: The profile offers them the ability to choose one member over the other, and the host chooses the visitor (and vice versa) based on the perceived ease of interaction. Specifically, Couchsurfers aim to minimize the high risk of social awkwardness when the two go from interacting online to meeting offline. Thus, the profile helps (a) a guest or host to express who she is, and (b)

allows the host or guest to discern if the given person will be someone he wants to interact with.

8.6 Trust and Expectation

Yet as Sztompka suggested, nobody knows how someone will act in the future. “If we had such full possibility of prediction, and strong, certain expectations, trust would be irrelevant. Trust is a bet about the future contingent actions of others and involves specific expectations” (Sztompka 1999). Once the host accepts the guest, only a few emails are exchanged—mainly emails providing directions that sometimes include a short informal description of the host’s or guest’s expectations. Traditions of how to act as a guest in a host’s home depend on one’s cultural background as well as on one’s social awareness. This means, that despite the fact that someone has been taught not to open the fridge and take a host’s food without asking, his level of social awareness makes him adhere to these norms. But despite one’s level of social awareness, a difference in behavioral norms based on one’s cultural background may create misunderstandings between host and visitor. The founder of Couchsurfing, a 30-year-old Alaskan computer programmer, expressed his concern with the community’s potential for cross-cultural misunderstanding when visiting or hosting. Based on this concern, the administrators of the Web site created a field on the user profile titled “Couch Information” that “will give surfers information on what they can expect and also what might be expected from them upon their arrival.” Dana, a 50-year-old American, is an experienced community member, having hosted more than 50 Couchsurfers on separate occasions. Under her “Couch Information,” she outlines a set of expectations.

I have a guest bedroom with bath available for one or two people, 2 couches, one quite small, and a little travel trailer. I have plenty of bedding. I live alone with my dog Luna about One and a half miles from town. The park is about half a mile so you can walk or ride bikes (I have 4 extras) to town or through the beautiful park. Smoking is allowed outside. I work from home so most the time I will have plenty of time to show you around. If you stay more than two days it would be great if you chip in for food and drinks if you want to have dinners here. I love to cook and you won’t regret it! Please let me know at least a week in advance so I can Plan for your stay.

Note that this feature in the user profile provides Dana with space to express her expectations and allows the potential guest to understand what Dana’s expectations are of them. If the guest disregards these expectations and, for example, smokes indoors, Dana will lose trust in her guest. A set of expectations provides the guest with an implicit understanding that he will be considered trustworthy if he follows

the outlined rules. The guest also avoids any cultural misunderstandings by adhering to the rules set out by the host. As stated earlier, another way expectations can be communicated online is through the messaging system. Nana's host may explicitly write her through the Couchsurfing email system that she (host) must study on the weekend and can only spend time with Nana in the evenings. This provides Nana with a clear set of expectations.

There are two mechanisms of expectation at play during the host-guest interaction. Hosts hold *explicit expectations* for their guests, and these expectations are made explicit through in-profile descriptions such as Dana's. Couchsurfers also have *implicit expectations*, hopes, or desires for the host or guest. The host, for example, may hope that her guest will bring her a gift, or the guest may hope that his host will show him her city, spend time with him, engage him in fascinating discussion, or bring him to an underground party. The implicit practice in Couchsurfing is co-present, face-to-face interaction between the host and guest. When the host's or guest's implicit expectations are unfulfilled, this results in disappointment rather than lack of trust. The unfulfilled implicit expectations are indirectly linked to the development of trust, as the complete development of closer relationships will not take place if the host and guest do not get to know each other through the expected interactions. Yet more directly linked to trust is the breach of an explicit expectation. When a Couchsurfer does not comply with an explicit expectation and, perhaps, smokes in the host's apartment despite the fact that the host's profile requested nonsmoking guests, the guest becomes less trustworthy in the eyes of her host.

8.7 Meeting Nonstrangers

When Nana travels to Stockholm, she is not fearful; rather, she is interested to see whether the familiarity and connection that she anticipated after reading the online profile of her future host are, in fact, present. Couchsurfers express that they do not sense fear when meeting their host or guest for the first time, rather, hold a sense of curiosity. This is yet another way in which trust over Couchsurfing functions: Nana trusts that the other Couchsurfer will be the person Nana expected her to be through the way her "self" was communicated in her online profile. To use Sztompka's phrasing, trust is a sort of bet about the future contingent on actions of others (Sztompka, p. 25). And much like the excitement that comes in winning a bet, Couchsurfers are rather curiously excited to find out if they "won" and were correct in their expectations. Couchsurfers often meet in public places for the first time. This has to do more with cultural norms that have been established than with a perception of risk or distrust in the other person. As an example, if Nana or her host states that she wants to meet in the host's apartment, she might perceive the other as being too straightforward and careless, and she would have reason to be suspicious. On the other hand, if Nana or her host suggests that they should meet in public first, one of them might perceive the other as being too paranoid or suspicious of her and be turned off by the other.

So despite the fact that Couchsurfers believe their interactions to be “more free” than the norm, Couchsurfers are still members of a society and have been socialized into a set of social rules and norms of how and how not to interact with people one has not yet met face to face. These sets of norms standardize the practice of even something so “free and open” as Couchsurfing is perceived to be. Despite the proliferation of online virtual communities, skepticism still exists when interaction moves from an online to an offline space. Suspicion is linked to an individual’s perception that another member of society is not playing the social game correctly. Thus, in order to enable smooth interaction, both the host and guest risk little by offering to meet in a public space.

And although Couchsurfers adhere to certain societal norms, there are other rules involved in the practice of hosting or visiting a member of a virtual community in an offline space, which must be established by the individuals involved. Adam, a 40-year-old American, when discussing his first interaction via Couchsurfing explained that “for both of us, it was our first time. So we didn’t really know [what to do].” After the host and guest meet and exchange greetings, most often the host leads the guest to his home (although sometimes the host has prior engagements, and she gives the keys to the guest and directs him to her home or simply takes him to her engagement; this is less common.) Adam explained what he told his first Couchsurfer, who ended up staying for ten days:

“Well, so there you are. You’re going to be here for a couple of days ... ok well, so I guess you’ll sleep here, I have a mattress for you. What are you doing tonight? Tomorrow? Hey you know what, I’m going to a party tomorrow night? And I have another one this weekend, and I have this show I’m going to go to. And there are a few people who want to meet you ...”

The tourist ritual of seeing a sight, the collective conventionalized belief that one object or space must be experienced visually is central to the traditional idea of tourism yet completely secondary to this sort of travel that is experienced through the hospitality network. Adam’s guest’s motivation to travel was not to have a sight-seeing experience in the traditional sense of the word. In our online survey out of eight different possible responses, only 14% of respondents answered, “seeing interesting sights of the world” as their primary motivation to travel, whereas 56% of respondents chose “personal growth/personal development (learning about yourself and the world around you.)”

We can note that the daytime or evening activities are dependent on the host’s lifestyle, and frequently the host and guest stay in the vicinity of their host’s home, immersed in dialogue. 42% of respondents in the same online survey expressed spending more than three hours per day with their hosts or guests, with 16% spending over six hours per day with them. At the same time, 28% said they spent between three and six hours and 20% said they spent between one and three hours per day. In this sense, hosts attempt to involve the guest in their own lives as much as possible,

but the level of involvement is often established online prior to meeting. If Nana had an uninvolved host, she would have to be more independent, occasionally asking her host for directions, maps, or sightseeing tips.

A Couchsurfer like Nana may stay with a host usually between two days and a week. Having only a limited amount of time, the guest and the host will maximize this time. The regular process of “getting to know” one another is quite different and extremely condensed compared to a friendship-making process where two people are grounded in a given locality. The process of familiarization between host and guest within this community functions on a different temporal continuum; both the time and the norms usually found within friendship shift due to various factors, which will be discussed. The first Couchsurfing visit of Karen, a 27-year-old Australian, was to a paramedic in his late thirties who lived in Dublin. Karen told me that the first night she stayed at his house, they had a conversation until two in the morning. When asked what they talked about, she explained: “For him it was the death of his wife, how he felt about his wife. Being diagnosed with polycystic kidneys. Kids ... relationships with his siblings. Travel stories. What his disappointments in life were. What he likes about life. What he liked about Northern Ireland. Some really interesting stories he’d seen because he’d been an ambulance driver during the troubles. Really interesting stories about um...shootings and things like that. He was totally open to any question I’d ask him.” And Karen said that she “had the same with just about every Couchsurfer.”

This level of self-disclosure and sped-up process of familiarization can be directly linked to the process that was started online. The design of the Web site instigated a sort of interaction between strangers, one where self-disclosure through one’s profile was the initial method of contact. When two individuals meet in a public setting, their initial discussion is rarely based on the type of self-disclosure expected within the Couchsurfing Web site; strangers do not normally share with each other their passions, life goals, life mission, and types of people they find interesting. Because the design of the Web site structures a response of relative self-disclosure online, the users involved in this interaction (looking at each other’s profiles, gathering information about each other, interacting through email) become part of a dialogue that continues offline with an openness to self-disclosure and candid intimacy. Nana explained, “When I talk to people, I do not wish to discuss the superficial things like ‘what went on in the football game’ or ‘which model has the biggest boobs,’ so with Couchsurfer there’s an excuse to avoid all that stuff because they’re only there for a short time. So you get closer faster.” But this feeling of “getting closer faster” is still instigated by the candidness found through the profile. Nana may approach her host in Stockholm by stating, “So you mentioned on your profile that you’ve been to Nepal. Tell me about that” or perhaps “I saw on your profile that you lived in South Africa and Italy. What were you doing there?” Reading another person’s online profile provides an illusion that we in fact know the other person or, as stated earlier, we are familiar with them.

The amount of time Nana spends interacting face to face with her host is also linked to trust. From our analysis based on our network data, we have come to

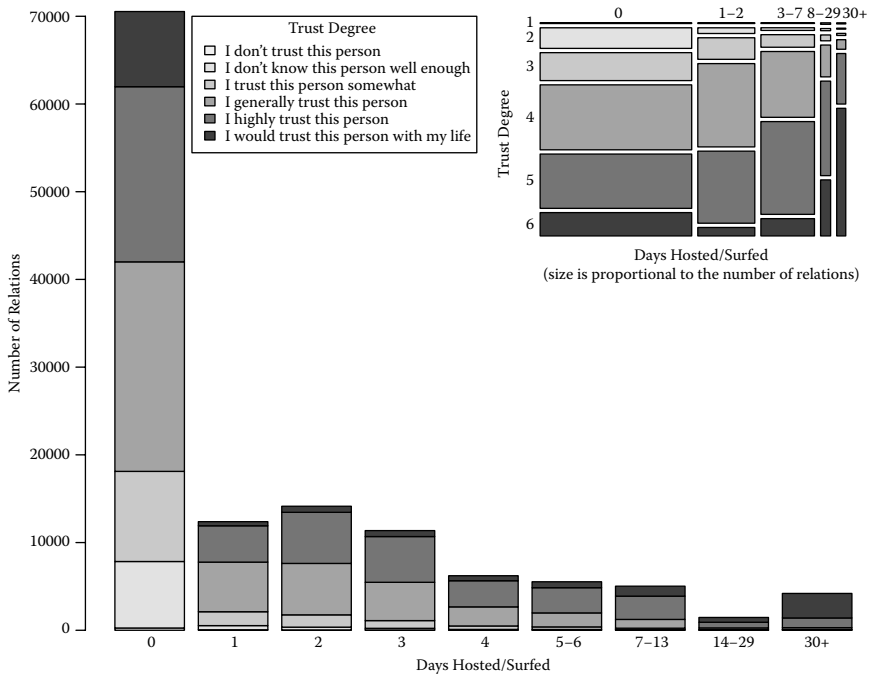


Figure 8.2 The dependence of trust levels on the time hosting and visiting.

conclude that those who hosted or visited one another, meaning those who spent a certain period of time with one another within a private space, are also more inclined to trust one another at a deeper level than those who had not hosted or visited and just exchanged emails online or met over coffee. Moreover, as we displayed in Figure 8.2, results from our data show that the longer the Couchsurfing visit, the stronger the trust is between individuals.

This is particularly worth noting if we want to analyze the context of a relationship as it relates to familiarization, and it forces us to question the link between the level of trust and the space in which interaction takes place. Within the hospitality exchange, trust develops at a high level, not contingent on a long period of time—the Couchsurfer usually stays for an average of only two days. The trustor (the host) has already allowed the guest into her controlled space; that is a large risk, bringing uncertainty and loss of control. Yet as the guest “proves” he is a good person, honoring the host’s ownership and control of a space, trust between the two becomes quite strong, and this strength grows exponentially over time. Moreover, trust within this private space is reciprocated. The upper hand, or the power, lies with the person who has control of a space—in this case the owner of the home. Consequently, just as the host trusts the guest to act in a certain way within his controlled space, the guest trusts the host not to harm her in any way within this space. This is linked to what

	Percent
I don't know this person well enough	6.7
I don't trust this person	.4
I trust this person somewhat	11.5
I generally trust this person	34.3
I highly trust this person	34.7
I would trust this person with my life	12.3

Figure 8.3 Trust levels on Couchsurfing.

was shown earlier in Figure 8.2; the hosted or visited relations as well as the number of days individuals hosted or visited each other have a positive impact on the level of trust. The more two people hosted or visited the more they trusted each other.

We would like to underline the fact that trust also becomes an effect of the reciprocity of self-disclosure. Interactions between hosts and guests are based on self-disclosure through storytelling, explaining personal problems, fears, hopes, or future plans.

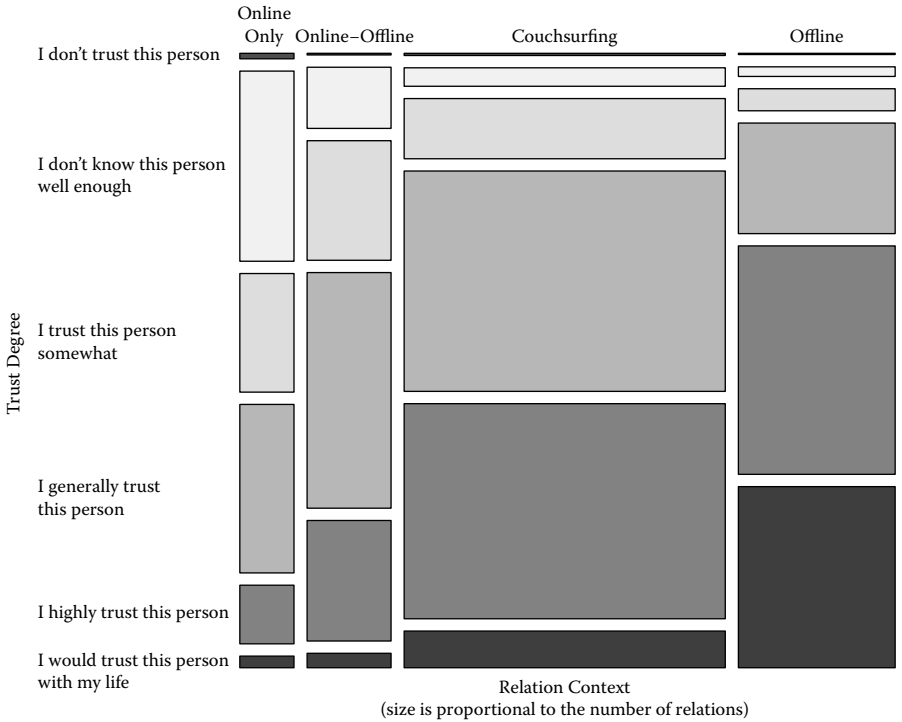


Figure 8.4 Trust levels among relations of a different origin.

Disclosing any sort of personal information involves psychological risk, such as the risk of rejection, risk of being judged, risk of being exploited, or the risk of being ridiculed. If despite this risk, one gains acceptance and openness from another person, then the other is more inclined to trust.

Moreover, if someone opens herself up before us, then we are more likely to trust her. If Nana's host in Stockholm tells her about her past personal problems, Nana would in turn be more inclined to trust her host because the host had risked something by speaking about her personal life. This large "gift" of self-disclosure is often reciprocal; Nana too would then feel inclined to talk about her life, creating a stronger bond of trust between her and her host. This reciprocity becomes a form of appreciation that creates a deeper sense of trust. Simon, a twenty-five-year-old from San Francisco, explained trust as a gift, stating that the more he risks in trusting the other person, the bigger the "gift" is and the more thankful the trusting party will be in receiving this gift. These risks are also involved in self-disclosure.

8.8 Inside the Private Sphere

The social navigation initiated online moves offline when the host and guest continue in interacting and exchanging trust. Without having a strict outlined space (e.g., a Web site) that offers certain affordances for appropriate interaction, the offline environment has less interactional structure and the users must socially navigate themselves through this new environment, making decisions and forming behavior. This creates, as Garfinkel (1963) outlined, a "perceivedly normal environment." Here, through interaction, the host and guest establish their conditions of play. The process can be outlined into stages that will explain the way in which the host and guest attempt to establish certain normative patterns of behavior in an offline setting.

First is the introduction stage, where the surfer and host meet in a public place or simply at the front door of the host's home and embrace or shake hands. Here, the surfer enters the private space of the host's home, the host shows the surfer his bed/floor space/mattress/etc. and gives him a tour of the house, and then they sit down to dinner or leave the house altogether in order to start touring the host's area. This is where the initial verbal exchange is initiated, as the individuals take turns giving a sort of monologue, building on their online profiles. After initial small talk, the first common biographical question we observed is centered on place, such as, "What brings you to Stockholm?" Or the guest may ask, "How long have you been living here?" Discussing physical place within this introductory dialogue is so common because both the host and guest are situated in the same apartment, in the same city. Yet, whereas the guest is a traveler, just passing through the given location, the host is a permanent resident and would know more about the place than the guest. This is why, instinctively, talk of place ends up being central to the introductory stage. This initial process of familiarization thus involves low risk and is engaged because it is based on a common subject among the two strangers.

The second stage, the insight stage, is the time in which one or both parties provide some insight into her own life, the lives of others around her, her personal history, her experiences, her problems, or her failures. As was stated earlier, these subjects tend to be the same subjects expressed on the online profiles. The one common theme in this stage is the presence of insight, which in turn raises the level of intensity of a conversation, thus raising the intimacy of the exchange. The insight stage can, but does not have to, include an exhibition of emotions, but it always includes a sense of trust for one or both parties. Eye contact and close, personal, spatial proximity is present. This process can last anywhere between an hour and several days, depending on how long the individual surfer stays with the host. It is worth noting that it is the insight stage that produces the close personal connection that individuals such as Nana longed for. It is in the insight stage that both the host and guest disclose intimate information about one another, heightening familiarity, which in turn, leads to a heightened degree of trust. Michael, a 30-year-old American, stated that on the “number of occasions” in which his hosts told him their life stories, he could tell that doing so was “exceptionally personal to them” and that they were “very involved in it.” This discussion is for Michael, “part of what makes this whole experience seem so special. These things which come across as very emotional and very personal to the other person, just get given out as these gifts to the stranger that came by.” As self-disclosure is looked at as a gift, often guests feel obliged to provide some travel stories, insight, or personal information about themselves in order to “give back” to the host. Both the host and guest attempt to create an environment where interaction seems “normal,” despite the fact that they do not have a prior understanding of how to interact with one another. Michael explained that “you have this intimate relationship where you’re sharing a physical space with someone that’s very personal to you and so to equalize this physical intimacy you develop this emotional intimacy and that kind of makes people more comfortable. Because as soon as they get really close and really personal with someone they don’t seem to feel that strange about how physically intimate the relationship is.”

As strangers become physically close or are confined to a set area, their physical closeness is out of balance with the emotional closeness or intimacy level they have with each other, and it becomes simply natural to try to “catch up” with the physical intimacy and start talking about oneself in order to avoid the feeling of awkwardness. The feeling of comfort, as Michael explained, is crucial. Implicit rules of play are thus established in the insight stage that allow the host and guest to feel comfortable with one another. The more comfortable the interaction between the host and guest, the more trustworthy they will feel to one another.

The third stage, termed here the embedding stage, is where the surfer has to leave to go to her next destination, and both parties are faced with the decision of whether or not to keep, or embed, this new friend in their span of friends. This decision is based on the intensity of exchange during the insight stage and the amount of intimacy and insight experienced by both parties. Michael described many of his conversations as

“special” or as a “gift.” The larger the “gift” is, meaning the more the host/guest opened up to the other, the more likely the person will be embedded within their memory.

This process of embedding is not at all physical; it is not about scribbling a name down in an address book or adding an email address to one’s email account. According to our online survey, Couchsurfers keep in touch with 50% of their hosts/surfers. Within this entire process, the introduction stage must occur in some shape or form but does not have any value for the embedding stage. If the host and guest felt comfortable in their interaction and a certain level of self-disclosure occurred (in the insight stage), then the two are more likely to embed one another in their list of friends. This “list” is both the online buddy list within the online social network and part of one’s imagined social network—the process in which we accept a friend into our lives. When someone is in our imagined social network, a number of friendship practices are adopted that involve this given individual, including introducing her to other friends and communicating with her on a “regular basis.”

8.9 Embedding Trust Online

Let’s return to Nana and assume that she has interacted with her host and returns to her home in Helsinki. She will soon after register her experience online. Couchsurfing offers two affordances for her to do this (a) Nana can add her host in Stockholm to her friendship list, and (b) Nana can give her host a reference. Both will show up on Nana’s profile, as will the level of trust.

Based on the online friendship links, the declared trust is high among Couchsurfers, as 47% of relations between users were declared as high trust relations. Only 0.4% of registered relations are distrust relations. In almost 7% of relations, users were not able to evaluate the level of their trust to another person.

The embedding stage leads us to a question: How has the process of familiarization online as well as the interaction offline led to a sense of trust between the host and guest? Furthermore, does it matter if users meet each other face to face, or is it possible for a virtual community to build trust strictly online?

In order to answer this question, we analyzed a large amount of anonymous whole network data provided by the administrators of Couchsurfing.com. Our data set was collected in the beginning of February 2006, when Couchsurfing had almost 45,000 active users,³ including 221,180 friendship dyads, which included various variables, such as the origin and the duration of acquaintanceship as well as how strongly the individuals trust one another on a scale of 1 to 6.

Our findings helped us understand that the context of acquaintanceship influenced the perception of trust. Those relationships that were created in an offline setting show a much higher trust tendency than those of people who know each other through Couchsurfing. By far, the most trustworthy are those relationships in which people know each other from an offline setting.

Offline friendships are those of Couchsurfers who stated that they knew each other before joining Couchsurfing. Here, with 33% of individuals giving each other the highest possible trust degree, 41% state they would highly trust the other person. This is significantly different from the strictly online connections, where only 2.1% of people gave out the highest trust degree, and, comparatively, 11% would highly trust each other. These online connections are those who interacted through email or the Couchsurfing chat room.

Yet in the context of this study, what is also worth noting is the degree of trust found among those who have met online and then either hosted or visited another member of the community. It seems that this face-to-face interaction makes a great difference to the trust degree. Compared to the online-only group, 39% of those dyads who engaged in Couchsurfing would highly trust each other, and 7% gave each other the highest degree of trust. Thus, individuals who know each other from face-to-face interactions are more likely to trust each other than are those who only know each other from an online context. Moreover, when people meet online and then offline and risk something by explicitly engaging in a trust exchange (as in hosting/surfing), they are more likely to trust one another than are those who did not engage in this exchange (only online–offline.)

8.10 Conclusions

The high level of trust between Couchsurfers may be an effect of what Coleman once identified as purposive action in which “individuals sometimes have a strong need to place trust” (Coleman 1990). Coleman explained this phenomenon using an example of a girl who trusts a boy to walk her through the woods despite not knowing the boy. This girl is lonely and needs companionship, which is potentially available but only if she places trust in the boy. Coleman assumed that both actors in the trust exchange are purposive, having the aim of satisfying their interests, whatever those might be (Coleman 1990). Couchsurfers may have no choice but to place trust in one another in order to fulfill their purpose of finding accommodation, meeting other travelers, interacting with locals, learning about the world, or gaining access to a local’s view of a place. This is true only if we disregard the fact that members of this virtual community make choices of whom to trust and not to trust. If Nana had been given the choice of only one host in Stockholm, she could potentially adopt a purposive trust that Coleman discussed. Yet as is often the case with Couchsurfing, trust is a choice. Moreover it is a choice among self-selected individuals who have a relatively similar approach to trust, strangers, and interest in others.

Users choose whom to trust based on the perceived level of familiarity they gain from another user. As we analyzed here, a virtual community offers affordances to members via their online profile that helps communicate personal information, creating a sense of familiarity between users. If a Couchsurfer makes use of these affordances and creates a detailed profile of himself, he is in turn creating a space in

which anyone viewing his profile can become familiar with who he is. Often members of this virtual community do not use the affordances offered by Couchsurfing, meaning, they do not fill in some areas in their profile, they do not attach a picture, or perhaps they do not add a friend to their “friendship list.” When another community member views this type of profile, she is less likely to gain a sense of familiarity from this user.

As we explored, familiarity does not always directly lead to trust. If Nana had a choice of two hosts in Stockholm, and both their profiles included a lot of personal description, Nana would have to choose whom she wanted to visit, and the decision would be based on whom she trusts more. This is where the idea of homophily provides us with some answers: We are more likely to trust those whom we know better, and often we are more likely to meet and interact with people who are similar to us. Even though Nana may feel familiar with both potential hosts in Stockholm, choosing the host who seems more similar to her will increase the likelihood of fluid interaction (having, for example, common topics to discuss.) Homophily also increases the chances of establishing a “perceivedly normal environment,” as it is generally easier to predict how someone similar to yourself will act than it is to interact with someone whom you do not understand, do not relate to, or do not share a cultural background with.

It seems that the more choice there is within an online–offline virtual community, the more social navigation an individual has to do in order to come to the conclusion of whom to interact with and whom not to interact with, or in the case of Couchsurfing, whom to trust and not to trust. The concept of social navigation is crucial in understanding the way in which users come to certain decisions in this array of choice found in such a community. Specific design affordances that we discussed such as the recommendation system help the user socially navigate throughout the virtual space. From this point of view, when interaction moves from an online to an offline sphere, the process is not fragmented; information provided in the online profile allows individuals to meet each other face to face for the first time, already being familiar with one another.

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