



THEMA: **Cosmopolitan Relationships in Couch-Surfing**

**An explorative analysis of a Web 2.0 platform**

# **Diplomarbeit**

im Studiengang Soziologie in der Fakultät Sozial- und  
Wirtschaftswissenschaften der Otto-Friedrich-Universität  
Bamberg

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**Abstract** In an era marked by massive global interconnectedness and dependencies, questions of world citizenship inevitably resurface and the Internet, as a tool for instant, global communication, is at the center of the contemplation. Scholars have traditionally focused their attention on the rising inequalities associated with globalized flows of goods and capital and the Internet is framed largely in terms of an empowerment structure with no integral effect on identity. This thesis explores how cosmopolitan community formation on the Internet can work by analyzing CouchSurfing, a hospitality network that makes use of Web 2.0 technology to govern membership and interaction. It creates a stable community of frequent, decentralized interaction. It facilitates cultural learning and supports the establishment of encumberable relationships across cultures.

# 1 Introduction

*“We envision a world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections with the people and places we encounter. Building meaningful connections across cultures enables us to respond to diversity with curiosity, appreciation and respect. The appreciation of diversity spreads tolerance and creates a global community.”* – CouchSurfing Vision Statement

This is the idealistic stance the founders of the hospitality network CouchSurfing.org take towards their project. The sociological buzzword in this statement is the idea of a ‘global community’ which, in philosophical terms, refers to the idea of cosmopolitanism. CouchSurfing thus qualifies as a research topic for sociological reflection and is especially interesting since it is a Web 2.0 phenomenon<sup>1</sup>. Sophisticated research about the Internet is still scarce and Web 2.0 phenomena have only recently sparked sociological interest. Additionally, theories about the Internet are inconsistent in regard to the issue of cosmopolitanism. Some theorists have argued that advances in transportation- and communication technology would, in the long run, make national boundaries obsolete and the spread of a cosmopolitan ideology would be a necessary consequence of these structural changes (see Rost, 1996; Bühl, 1997; Stratton, 1997; Porter, 1997). However, Calhoun (2002) points out that widespread cosmopolitanism as a consequence of globalization is a myth resulting from the self-congratulatory understanding of the phenomenon on the part of Western elites. Social scientific theorizing on the matter may thus be influenced by the ethnocentrism of the researchers themselves. Research on the state of Eritrea provides further reasons for skepticism about the cosmopolitanizing potential of globalization in general and the Internet in particular. In her article *Eritrea Goes Global: Reflections of Nationalism in a Transnational Era*, Bernal (2004) explains that new technology and transnational interconnectedness are a double-edged sword that can account for both social openness and closure. In the Eritrean case, the Internet was used to sustain a diaspora by enabling Eritreans to stay involved in local struggles and thus keeping their national identity while building a life in a different country. Their national identity had such a strong influence that Eritreans living in diaspora (at certain times these accounted

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<sup>1</sup>Web 2.0 or “social web” refers to internet content that is marked by interactivity between the users. Where former websites had a clear distinction between producer and consumer (similar to mainstream media) Web 2.0 applications offer an “architecture of participation” (O’Reilly, 2007, p. 17) with reliance on user-generated content and the ability to make use of collective intelligence. However, the extent of user participation varies considerably between applications.

for approx.  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the population) were willing to send enough money to their homeland to fund the war for independence. In terms of the research interests in this thesis, the important lesson from both Calhoun's and Bernal's discussions of the issue is that while it seems plausible to propose a connection between globalization and cosmopolitanism, the issue is far more complicated. Thus, rather than speculating on utopian meta effects of the Internet as a medium, it seems more useful to look at particular communities and how they connect individuals and shape identities. While the myth of the withering away of the nation state has been untangled, little theoretically informed research exists about internet communities as of yet (exceptions include Porter, 1997; Smith and Kollock, 1999; Howard and Jones, 2005; Adams and Smith, 2008; Greif et al., 2011) and none of them deal explicitly with the issue of cosmopolitanism.

The present thesis attempts to fill this void with a study of CouchSurfing, the largest hospitality network on the Internet. It analyzes the infrastructure of the platform and how it makes use of Web 2.0 technology to facilitate a cosmopolitan ideology among its members. Additionally, the effectiveness of the project is evaluated via a survey study created to serve the research purposes. These purposes include an evaluation of the internalization of cosmopolitan norms and values, an analysis of the social structure of the network, and a detailed look at the goods and services that are being exchanged. A critical light is shed not only on the question how many transnational relationships are formed, but also how deep these relationships go. This step is included because cosmopolitan thinking alone tells little about cosmopolitan solidarity. Without an actual manifestation in patterns of behavior, cosmopolitanism remains an empty phrase. While the connection seems obvious, a person can feel cosmopolitan just by virtue of being well-traveled but without actually showing any concern for global problems or local challenges derived from globalization. Likewise, members may surf<sup>2</sup> only to reduce costs while traveling and host because of norms of reciprocity. Nejezchleba (2011) argues on behalf of this view by claiming that reciprocity is what makes the community work and that it is the principle CouchSurfing is based on. However, while reciprocity is without a doubt part of the process of encouraging people to engage in long-term interactions with members and the community as a whole, the idea behind CouchSurfing is the creation of "inspiring experiences" and "meaningful connections" and thus cosmopolitan solidarity<sup>3</sup>. The motivation for hosting then is curiosity rather than obligation. The question of to what extent the ideology is reflected by the users adds to the complexity of the issue.

To make this complexity sociologically comprehensible, the thesis includes a concept that has not yet been applied to analyses of social relationships in any consistent way; the encumbrance capacity of social relationships. It draws on the idea that solidarity is best analyzed with objective measures of the resources that are being activated to initiate and

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<sup>2</sup>In this context, surfing is figuratively used to refer to spending the night in a stranger's home.

<sup>3</sup>This is the stated intention of the founders accessible at: <http://www.couchsurfing.org/about/mission/>

maintain relationships among people. It can be applied to any kind of relationship and is an important addition to existing network theories. The concept enables scientists to move beyond the individual when analyzing relationships and address matters of community from an angle more focused on actual manifestations of solidarity. The advantage, compared to Rational Choice theories (e.g. exchange theory or the notion of reciprocity), lies in the ability to also account for altruistic relationships and unilateral transfer of resources. In the particular context of CouchSurfing, it can shed light on the quality of the relationships formed through the website. Do surfers and hosts only have a relationship based on exchange and reciprocity? Is it a mere matter of “I’ll let you stay at my house, you’ll let me stay at your house” or is there more to it? Is the mutual belonging to the CouchSurfing network a sufficient explanation for the willingness to share resources with strangers? Do similarities in milieu or habitus account for this? The encumbrance capacity of social relationships provides an appropriate framework for answering these questions.

To put the arguments set forth here into perspective, the following two chapters examine the issue of cosmopolitanism starting with theoretical considerations of the relationship between modern technology, with special focus on the Internet, and the ideal of cosmopolitanism. This is the most crucial point because it links the extensive body of literature on cosmopolitanism to the relatively new area of research about the Internet. It will become clear that the Internet is a suitable tool for cosmopolitization but does not produce global citizens by itself. Rather, specific agents<sup>4</sup> are needed to promote the corresponding principles. If this is the case and communities combine the technological possibilities of the Internet with a cosmopolitan ideology, it can have strong effects on people’s value systems. Moving on to chapter three, we start with a historical overview of cosmopolitanism, including discussions of relevant contributions from philosophy that have influenced the evolution of the concept since its first appearance in ancient Greece. Subsequently, contemporary notions of cosmopolitanism are discussed and the sociological dimension is highlighted. Finally, the issue of cosmopolitanism in CouchSurfing is explored. Readers will learn what kind of cosmopolitanism CouchSurfing can be attributed to and how it is put into practice. The fourth chapter argues that cosmopolitan thinking does not necessarily also imply cosmopolitan action. The new connectedness via Internet has made it easier to establish and maintain relationships regardless of distance, thus, the number of social ties has increased for many people. However, since resources are limited for every individual (though for some more than for others), there are profound differences in the amount of resources that can be activated in a given relationship, be it offline or online. Relationships that are formed in the virtual realm have a reputation for being less meaningful than contacts kept offline. However, a sophisticated theoretical and methodological approach to test this hypothesis is missing in the social sciences up to this

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<sup>4</sup>Agent in this context does not refer to the agent-principal theory but is used in its literal sense referring to services and persons acting on behalf of cosmopolitan ideals.

date. Therefore, the chapter aims to lay the groundwork for it by outlining the concept of the encumbrance capacity of social relationships. Its foundation with Aristotle's elaborations on friendship (Aristotle, 1995) is explained and empirical indicators are deduced. Additionally, it is made clear that trust is a component of utmost importance in an encumberable relationship. Subsequently, the fourth chapter explains the methodological approach of the empirical part. Since it is an exploratory study, it covers a wide range of topics rather than being focused on a particular aspect. Accordingly, most statistical analyses remain at a descriptive level. The goal is to give an overview of the social structure of the members, their experiences within the network, and their attitudes concerning the community. The range of topics also includes sociodemographic characteristics, reciprocity norms, social capital, ideology, and involvement with the community (center vs. periphery). Empirical indicators for the encumbrance capacity of the social relationships formed within the network and a measure for cosmopolitan identification are introduced as well. Once the theoretical foundation and methodological approach are clear, we may turn our attention to the actual phenomenon in question: the CouchSurfing community. The sixth chapter starts with a general overview of the platform. What is the proposed purpose? What do the founders want to accomplish? How do they go about doing this? Additionally, the implications of using Web 2.0 technology are investigated. The structure is then confronted with the data from the survey to investigate the actual behavior and attitudes of the members. Do they conform to the ideals? Are they a homogeneous or heterogeneous group? What is the nature of the relationships that are formed amongst the members? Implications from sociodemographic characteristics are discussed as well. In sum, the analysis will give the reader a deeper understanding of the social structure of the CouchSurfing community and of the mechanisms that explain it. The usefulness of the concept of the encumbrance capacity of social relationships will hereby receive special attention. To complete the picture, a brief discussion of the implications of recent changes like the Facebook linkup and the move from a non-profit organization to a B-Corporation is also included. It shall become clear that CouchSurfing is one of the most sophisticated endeavors in facilitating cosmopolitanism, although mechanisms of selection impose constraints on the proposed openness. In times of economic crises and rising uncertainties, the need for support, community and a sense of belonging is heightened and the CouchSurfing community provides this regardless of national affiliations.

A quick side-note before starting off: The critical reader may have noticed the seemingly synonymous use of the terms network, community, and platform when referring to CouchSurfing. However, this is neither a sign of carelessness nor random. This distinction rather accounts for the fact that CouchSurfing shows characteristics of all three of these concepts. By using one term or the other, the specific quality that is important for a thought is emphasized. While *platform* emphasizes the technical aspect of CouchSurfing as an internet application which uses Web 2.0 technology, the term *network* highlights the fact that it links people amongst each other. These linkages may then create a *community*



if people attach meaning to them. In short, platform stands for the technical aspects, network for connections, and community for a shared meaning.

## 2 The Internet - A Challenge for the Nation State?

*Nothing is permanent but change* – Heraclitus

Our contemporary world is shaped by rapid technological advances. As Weber (2001) has pointed out in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, progress and material growth are a key element of today's capitalist societies. Technological change is also a major source of social change. New tools expand the scope of possibilities available to individuals who possess them and even though culture, institutions and individuals are sometimes slow in adapting to the new environments they create, outside circumstances also shape values and beliefs in significant ways.

### 2.1 Denationalization

The Internet is one of the most influential technological advances of our contemporary world. In the light of the changes this new medium brings about, values, beliefs and ways of thinking need to be renegotiated as well. Given the nature of this new invention as well as simultaneous advances in transportation technology and processes of globalization, an important area of renegotiation is the issue of cosmopolitanism, the idea that national boundaries no longer have meaning and people's primary allegiance is with humanity as a whole. The Internet makes it possible to instantly connect individuals in different geographical locations, regardless of distance and borders. In this virtual realm it seems that time and space do not matter. Manuel Castells, a leading researcher and theorist on matters of the Internet and networks calls this *timeless time* and the *space of flows*. He states that the Internet offers a universal space where time is compressed and desequenced and place is annihilated. Everyone can interact with everyone, everywhere at any time. He goes on to say that this "new electronic communication system characterized by its global reach, its integration of all communication media, and its potential interactivity is changing and will change forever our culture" (Castells, 2010c, p. 357). Other authors make similar remarks. Bühl (1997, p. 45) states that electronic networks cause a despatialisation, a devaluation of geographically structured space and Turkle (1995, p. 9f) remarks that, on the Internet, "we have the opportunity to build new kinds of communities, virtual communities, in which we participate with people from

all over the world, people with whom we converse daily, people with whom we may have fairly intimate relationships but whom we may never physically meet”. The first scholar to present this idea was Marshall McLuhan. He believed that the most profound changes in society occur with the introduction of new technology and especially new media. In his influential book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (McLuhan, 1962), he spoke of a *global village* created by the interconnectedness in the new, virtual environment.

One may start to wonder at this point how far reaching the consequences of the virtual environment really are. After all, virtual contact is qualitatively different from real face-to-face interaction. It is missing crucial elements like smell and feel and in many cases (chatrooms, instant messengers, discussion boards, etc.) even sound, gestures and facial expressions. To put it bluntly, a poke on Facebook can not replace a hug from a loved one so there is reason for doubt that connectivity through the Internet can function as a proper functional equivalent to real life encounters. Castells addresses this problem by outlining the concept of *real virtuality*, meaning that the Internet, although virtual in nature, has become very real in its consequences. Thus, he argues, there is no virtual reality but only real virtuality. This is in line with the Thomas Theorem (one of the few sociological “laws”) which states that “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas, 1928, p. 572). Thus, the virtual environment should be seen as an extension to rather than a replacement for existing methods of communication and expression. Both are now part of the human experience and a clear distinction between what is virtual and what is real seems arbitrary. The growing prominence of Web 2.0 services (with Facebook as the most dominant form) can be seen as evidence for the profound interdependence of the real and the virtual in creating our contemporary culture. Castells does point out, however, that this real virtuality creates a bipolar opposition of the net (which is universalistic and dislocated) and the self (which is geographically located and possesses a local identity). This opposition, in turn, weakens the power of nations even further. When the fundamental dichotomy for the individual lies between the global and the local, the nation, holding an intermediary position, ceases to matter and networks become the dominant environment in which power and identity are being negotiated (Castells, 2010a).

## 2.2 Limitations

The extent of the impact of the Internet in general may be overemphasized since access to the Internet is unequally distributed and large parts of the world’s population are still willingly or unwillingly cut off from it. This phenomenon has come to be known as the “Digital Divide” (popular publications include Haddon, 2011; Hargittai, 2002; James, 2003; Norris, 2001; Van Deursen and Van Dijk, 2011; Warschauer, 2004). It is well-documented that Internet use varies greatly between individuals, especially along the lines of education, income, and age with poor, older, and low-educated people showing

the lowest rates. There is also a profound global Digital Divide showing high rates of Internet penetration almost exclusively for Western, industrialized countries. It is not surprising that a new technology like the Internet is, at first, only available to and used by a relatively small elite; this implies that possible cosmopolitanizing effects are limited to this elite as well.

It may be just a matter of time before the digital divide is bridged, but even in this case, there is considerable doubt among scholars that nations and nationalism will cease to play a role in the global arena. On the contrary, nations are becoming increasingly important on the Internet as well. They are powerful social actors and jurisdiction and methods of content control allow for national division of content. This is especially true for non-democratic states where censorship is an essential part of national governmentality<sup>1</sup>. During the course of my research, a CouchSurfer living in Abu Dhabi even reported problems accessing the CouchSurfing website due to content blocking. However, within democratic states the access to information is being increasingly controlled as well. Significant changes both in legislation and practice are currently being debated and implemented, many of which revolve around intellectual property rights. A prime example of national diversification of content is provided by the German GEMA association, which has effectively managed to force Youtube to block any videos from German recording firms. Similarly, the music streaming site Grooveshark closed down its website for the German audience because they could not reach an agreement with GEMA about licensing rates. Meanwhile, hacker groups and freedom of information activists who are offering ways around regional restrictions are being increasingly criminalized. Legislators in the US have been trying to pass laws like the “Stop Online Piracy Act” (SOPA), which would have enabled the US law enforcement to block internet domains if they contained copyrighted material. The “PROTECT IP Act” (PIPA) was closely related and was also targeted at pursuing copyright infringement more effectively while imposing limits on freedom of speech by making companies liable for the actions of their users. The most recent attempt is the “Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act” (CISPA) which, if passed, would give US government officials the right to use internet traffic information for criminal persecution, effectively linking internet service providers and the government closer together. The bill was passed. It is no easy task to untangle the complex relationships between national, transnational and international actors who are fighting a digital turf war about which and how digital content may be reproduced and distributed and, more importantly, who may profit from this. It would take at least another thesis to explore this in detail; the short discussion here is simply meant to sensitize the reader to the fact that nation-states and national actors can have a big influence on the Internet as well and that the virtual realm we are experiencing is not as global and universal as it seems. Thus, views of a nation-free Internet may be distorted. The most compelling

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<sup>1</sup>For further information on the concept of governmentality, see Foucault (2009) *Security, Territory, Population*

argument against the disappearance of nation states is that a nation is more than just its territorial contour and political institutions. It is a source of identification and provides a sense of belonging. It may even be seen as a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (community of fate) establishing solidarity among its members. This solidarity is not necessarily restricted to people in a certain geographical region; thus the Internet has actually made possible what can be called transnational nationalism. Contrary to the implications from McLuhan's and Castells' analyses, Eriksen (2007, p.1) claims that "the Internet is used to strengthen rather than weaken, national identities". He argues that the Internet actually enables nations to preserve themselves by creating virtual communities based on a shared national identity. Thus, national identification can now be exercised across national borders. How far-reaching the consequences of this transnational nationalism can be is best exemplified by the Eritrean case.

Eritrea is a small state in Africa which ranks among the poorest areas in the world. Till 1993 Eritreans were struggling for independence from Ethiopia and disputes about legitimate borders are still going on today. During the 30-year war with Ethiopia, around  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the Eritrean population fled the country, thus geographically removing themselves from the conflict. However, globalization and the Internet made it possible for Eritreans to maintain an active diaspora network through which large amounts of funding could be activated. Without these funds, the war for independence could not have been financed. For the emigrants, the contact to their homeland had a community-building function and gave them a sense of purpose, especially when faced with discrimination and racism in their host countries. The formation of states seems especially arbitrary in Africa because the countries have been established by European powers without reference to language or ethnicity. However, national independence has profound meaning for them because it also means political power. Thus, Eritreans do not value their nation because it is a community by itself, but because nations are important actors in transnational contexts. Especially for poor states like Eritrea, the nation state is an important means of articulating and enforcing local interests in a global environment and the Internet is used to empower national movements rather than weaken them. Through the Internet, Eritrean scholars were able to draw on revolutionary literature, ideologies, and experiences from other countries to gain knowledge about effective ways to fight their own battles. Eritreans in diaspora were able to stay politically active, form discussion groups and keep involved in affairs concerning their homeland as well as to raise awareness of their struggles in their host countries. This example shows that globalization, increased communication, and exchange of ideas does not necessarily imply a withering away of the nation state, but that there are simultaneous processes of denationalization of the national and nationalization of the transnational (Bernal, 2004).

## 2.3 Implications

There is a number of lessons to be learned from this discussion for the research purposes of this thesis. Firstly, the Internet as a new medium brings about profound change in our societies. It opens up new possibilities for sociability and makes possible new kinds of communities. It creates an environment of real virtuality in which power and identity are renegotiated.

Secondly, a rise in cosmopolitanism is not the inevitable, long-term consequence of this change and deterritorialization does not necessarily imply denationalization as well. While the virtual affects the real in increasing ways, the virtual realm is not an isolated entity either. The integration works both ways so that ideological constructs like nationalism vs. cosmopolitanism merely take on different forms on the Internet. Thus, the prominence of one concept or the other is not a structural necessity but depends on the producers of services and content on the Internet. This increasingly includes every internet user since Web 2.0 makes impossible a clear distinction between consumers and producers. Nationalism serves different functions for the individual and as long as these functions can not properly be fulfilled by cosmopolitan alternatives, nations will continue to matter. Theories that do predict the demise of the nation state often assume that cosmopolitanism will prevail automatically and few ideas are being proposed on how this change should be brought about. The question of what is supposed to fill the void when the functions that nations have for individuals are suddenly no longer fulfilled remains largely unanswered. As long as cosmopolitan communities are rare and organizations with humanist ideals and a cosmopolitan mission are not ready to function as alternatives for nationally based solidarity, people may turn to other communities (including radical groups) to get support and create a sense of belonging.

However, all hope is not lost for the cosmopolitan dream. The Internet Era has empowered social movements with cosmopolitan ideals as well. Prime examples are charitable organizations operating on a global level like Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Oxfam. Other movements like Occupy, Avaaz.org, or Anonymous also have a cosmopolitan vision and they too make explicit use of internet applications to coordinate their activities, share information, and acquire funds<sup>2</sup>. Cosmopolitanism needs agents with a clear purpose and agenda. In a culture of real virtuality, the Internet can empower actors and serve as platform for representation of one's ideals. However, in order to truly have an impact on society, movements need to be able to create relationships that have true meaning for individuals and for which they are willing to make sacrifices regardless of their own benefit. In other words, modern cosmopolitanism as an alternative to state-organized solidarity implies the establishment of encumberable social relationships between people who share the same global vision. It is argued here that CouchSurfing is one of the most

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<sup>2</sup>Anonymous is probably the most radical form of cosmopolitan activism. Within the network, members are indistinguishable in terms of race, gender or any other identifiable characteristics. Their activities target global actors in the virtual realm.

sophisticated approaches to this.

Before this can be explored in detail, it is necessary to outline the different forms of cosmopolitanism that have been prevalent throughout history and how this has affected our contemporary understanding of it. This also includes a discussion of the CouchSurfing-version of cosmopolitanism. Furthermore, a critical light is shed on the difference between inhabiting a cosmopolitan perspective and actual cosmopolitan action.

## 3 Cosmopolitanism

*Patria est ubicumque bene est*<sup>1</sup> – Cicero

Cosmopolitanism is a term with diverse meanings and misleading media representations add to the confusion even further. A popular example is the magazine “Cosmopolitan”, in which topics revolve around celebrities, fashion, beauty, and an elite lifestyle. Closely related is the show “Sex and the City”, in which the protagonists’ preferred drink is a Cosmopolitan which they consume in fancy bars and restaurants and whose desires revolve largely around the consumption of high-value consumer goods like expensive fashion accessories. The show is situated in New York, an urban setting where multiculturalism is the norm and categories for solidarity form along the lines of successful vs. not-successful, beautiful vs. non-beautiful, and rich vs. poor. In this environment, a person’s value is largely determined by the ability to accumulate wealth. Thus, it is no coincidence that the main male character “Mr. Big” (the name itself being extremely suggestive in a number of ways) is a successful business man. In the milieu displayed, cosmopolitanism is associated with a lifestyle of wealth and fame. With media acting as a multiplier, cosmopolitanism has come to be associated with rich, white people for large parts of the population (Calhoun, 2008). However, this is at best an expression of a neoliberal version of cosmopolitanism and bears little resemblance to the original notion thought up by Greek philosophers. In fact, it even seems paradoxical to use the word in such a context if one takes a closer look at its history. This chapter describes the history and varieties of the cosmopolitan ideal. It also includes a discussion of the sociological debates surrounding the phenomenon and contests the term with related notions like globalization, transnationalism, or internationalism. This will leave the reader with an improved understanding of the concept in question and what it means in relation to the present analysis of CouchSurfing.

### 3.1 The History of Cosmopolitanism

The birth of the idea of cosmopolitanism is said to date back to 412 B.C. in ancient Greece when Diogenes of Sinope, upon being asked where he was from replied: “I am a citizen of the world” (Navia, 2005). This expression needs to be put in context because it was not meant to convey ideas of global peace, equality or mutual understanding, but simply a

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<sup>1</sup>Where I am at ease, there is my country



statement of protest against existing norms, i.e. the perceived overvaluation of territorial origin. In Diogenes time, the city-state called “polis” was the main category of belonging and people were judged according to what polis they came from. Diogenes, however, was a Cynic (not to be confused with cynicism) and thus part of a group of philosophers who rejected conventional values like wealth, power, and fame and instead lived simple lives in harmony with nature and as free of possessions as possible. Accordingly, they rejected the ideological and political construct of the polis as something that was artificially made up by people and to which a special meaning was ascribed *ex post*. In nature, places have no special significance other than their geological qualities and their ability to provide for their inhabitants. To place any value on origin is unnatural and the mere question implies the need to counter with a provocative remark. For Diogenes, cosmopolitanism was a political event, a specific act of opposition against established norms and institutions (Leung, 2009).

It was not until the Stoics that the term cosmopolitanism was coined. Consisting of the words “cosmos” and “polis”, it refers to the notion of belonging to a universal city, the whole earth, and to a universal people, humanity. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines *cosmopolitan* as “1. containing people of different types or from different countries, and influenced by their culture” or “2. having or showing a wide experience of people and things from many different countries” (Hornby, 2000, p. 281). While this describes a popular contemporary notion of the concept, it reduces the cosmopolitan to merely a frequent traveler, whereas the true cosmopolitan, in a Stoic sense, is a world citizen and a humanist. He shows an indifference towards social origin and his primary allegiance is to humanity as a whole. This is at least true for the early Stoics like Zeno of Citium (Pagden, 2000, p. 3):

*“We should all live not in cities and demes, each distinguished by separate rules of justice, but should regard all men as fellow demesmen and fellow citizens; and that there should be one life and order as of a single flock feeding together on a common pasture.”*

The Stoics, however, did not reject the polis as non-cosmopolitan. They believed that human beings should serve one another as best they can but also that it is impossible to do this equally well for everyone. Thus, local affiliations are usually the most convenient way to act out solidarity although global cause-effect relationships are not to be ignored either. The practical implication of this is that “a cosmopolitan considers moving away in order to serve, whereas a non-cosmopolitan does not” (Kleingeld and Brown, 2011). A contemporary resemblance of this thought can be found in the phrase “Think globally, act locally”, which is now widely used especially in the context of environmental protection and grassroots movements. Even businesses have adopted the phrase in order to display social responsibility in a globalized world and to refer to the practice of tailoring standardized products to fit local customer needs. The buzzword here is “glocalization”.

Focusing again on ancient cosmopolitanism, the meaning of the term slowly changed in a profound way after Zeno. Rather than teaching respect and tolerance of others, cosmopolitanism under Cicero evolved into an instrument of justification for Roman imperial practices. The vision of a single human community then implied that its culture be uniform and guided by a *logos* (purpose) as the principle of reason (Pagden, 2000). For the Stoics it is rationality that makes human beings equal to one another, so anyone considered irrational or uncivilized could conveniently be excluded or at least be seen as less worthy of solidarity. To draw upon a metaphor by George Orwell: All humans are equal, but some are more equal than others. The Stoic version of cosmopolitanism also included a civilizing mission which, in practice, meant imposing the Roman culture upon non-Romans as well. The idea was a universal human community governed by a universal, natural law with Roman law being the most suitable prototype.

The notion of a universal, natural, cosmopolitan law was then further developed by Kant. He tried to find the best kind of global structure that would minimize or even eliminate the threat of war. For him, this structure would be achieved through a federation of free and independent states bound to the *ius cosmopolitanicus*, the cosmopolitan right to hospitality. In his *Third Definite Article for Perpetual Peace* Kant makes clear that “The Law of World Citizenship Shall Be Limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality” (Kant, 1983, p. 8). Thus, while the cosmopolitan right stands above national laws and applies universally throughout the world and includes every member of the human race, it is more of a categorical imperative and does not include an actual governing body with a formal structure that could enforce this right. This is where Kant refrained from Stoic cosmopolitanism and created the basis for the modern notion of multicultural cosmopolitanism. Kant did not plead for abolishing nation states in favor of a world state where the very structure would imply multiple cosmopolitan laws, but saw cosmopolitanism rather as an imperative of hospitality (Leung, 2009).

Cosmopolitanism has come to mean very different things for different people. It is an urban lifestyle concept associated with wealth and fame, it may refer to well-traveled individuals with varied life experience, it was used as legitimization for imperial practices, used to protest established norms of localism and nationalism, and seen as a project for global peace and humanism sometimes with absence of nation states and sometimes as a moral principle governing transnational relations of independent nation states. The important lesson is that cosmopolitanism does not automatically imply the absence of nation states, nor does it condemn patriotism in any particular way. It simply states that a person’s primary allegiance is to humanity as a whole. Contemporary advocates of cosmopolitanism have usually focused on the three traditions outlined here (Cynic, Stoic, and Kantian) and refined them to be applicable to the modern world. Popular examples include Martha Nussbaum, David Held and Jürgen Habermas. Habermas, for example, focuses heavily on Kant’s ideas, especially the notion that cosmopolitanism and nationalism are not exclusive categories and that a cosmopolitan world order should in-

clude nation states and national laws and account for culturally different histories and traditions of the particular regions (Fine and Smith, 2003). The Internet creates an environment of (virtual) freedom and connectivity and the new possibilities have empowered and continue to empower organizations, institutions, and movements that know how to use them. The global village has shrunk the world and made the cosmopolitan dream more achievable than ever, maybe even necessary to bolster up against the adverse effects of globalization where events in one part of the world may have instantaneous and sometimes far-reaching consequences in another. However, its prevalence in the minds of people and the presumably resulting peaceful world are far from certain.

## 3.2 Cosmopolitanism of Connections

A comprehensive analysis of the sociological implications and consequences of cosmopolitan ideals and practices is offered by Calhoun (2010, forthcoming). He stresses the importance of belonging and the significance of culture in the debates surrounding cosmopolitanism and provides a useful framework for the analysis of the CouchSurfing community, which is why his contemplations are explored in detail.

The starting point is globalization and its presumably unjustified connection to an inevitable rise of cosmopolitanism which is seen as a confusion of the “is” and the “ought”. Calhoun criticizes Western elites for misleadingly propagating the myth of widespread cosmopolitanism and sees this as a result of a self-congratulatory understanding of the phenomenon. While for them, the elite, passports and visas are easily available and a global perspective is part of their daily routine, while large parts of the Eastern world and also people within Western society are either not allowed to travel, don’t want to travel or are forced to migrate. This way, scholars tend to marginalize nationalist movements and right-wing populism as too unsophisticated to really matter. The same is true for religious movements which are labeled as non-progressive and therefore errors to be corrected on the way to an inclusive, cosmopolitan world order. Elites are able to navigate the world and organize their lives as autonomous, disembedded individuals and tend to forget the benefits that belonging has provided for them as well (e.g. in the form of education or other public services) and believe that they are able to do more things for themselves as individuals without depending on social institutions. Inherent to this view is that culture (especially national culture) is something to be overcome if one wants to be a citizen of the world. Furthermore, cosmopolitanism is seen as morally and rationally superior or even necessary to lead responsible life in a globalized world. Calhoun calls this the *class consciousness of frequent travelers* (Calhoun, 2002), in which local cultures are seen as restrictive and only fit for those who have not enlarged their perspective by travel. Becoming global is an emancipation from culture, a move towards pure rationality where the individual creates its own life through conscious choice and communicative action. This view, however, neglects the fact that culture is shaping every social setting. The idea that

culture is something we leave behind when entering discussions about whether skiing is better in the Alps or the Rockies or whether Spanish or Chilean wines travel better is an illusion. Rather, we enter a new culture which is in many ways more narrow than the cultures of many nation states, despite its embeddedness in global travel. It is a culture of people who understand themselves as culture-free and radically individual and of those in privileged positions in general. The ways in which cosmopolitanism is discussed today can be distinguished in three categories (Calhoun, 2010, forthcoming):

- Cosmopolitanism as Style
- Ethical Universalism
- Cosmopolitanism of Connections

It is important to discuss all three of them, though the last one is the most relevant for CouchSurfing. Cosmopolitanism as style is the consumerist perspective and a reduced version without any broader social, ethical, or political concerns. It is self-congratulation for those who have adopted global and/or elite skills like being able to eat Asian food with chopsticks or correctly ordering a French meal in a fancy restaurant. This perspective sees cosmopolitanism as a matter of individual choice, self-expression, and self-realization and is symbiotic with market fundamentalist globalization. It creates the illusion that cultural tastes are there for everyone to enjoy if one simply chooses to do so, where in reality they are very much dependent on material resources that are very unequally distributed. What appears to be free, individual choice is often made possible by capital, may it be social, cultural, or economic. The consumerist cosmopolitan wrongly assumes that being a citizen of the world requires only a change in attitude and forgets that cosmopolitanism as a lifestyle-choice is reserved for the well-traveled, well-educated, and well-situated. This attitude also implies that widespread cosmopolitanism can be achieved without any structural changes and is in many ways anti-political. Furthermore, this kind of cosmopolitanism fails to comprehend that belonging to so called non-progressive forms of community like national and religious ones matters to ordinary people. This creates a feeling of being looked down upon by elites and gives rise to populist movements that consist of people who are strongly attached to their collectives and identities that they see as denigrated.

The second way in which cosmopolitanism gets discussed is ethical universalism. This denotes a “doctrine that all persons ought to be treated with equal and impartial positive consideration for their respective goods or interests” (Gewirth, 1988, p. 283). While this idea is useful as a moral principle and in political theory and judicial practice (“All men are created equal”, “Everyone is equal before the law”) it ignores the more complex realities in which people establish, maintain, and float solidarities and enmities. It focuses on the abstract equivalence of people as human beings but does not grasp that every individual is incorporated in unique historical, geographical, and cultural settings. It takes

the lowest common denominator of human nature as a basis for moral finger-pointing, but the categorical equivalence of all humans is but a description of an abstract whole, while building particularized solidarities is part of the human experience and reality as well. Thus, trying to treat as equal what is essentially not equal is bound to fail and potentially dangerous. Liberal cosmopolitan thought often implies that belonging is a social constraint from which the rational and responsible individual ought to escape in order to be able to identify with humanity as a whole as a first priority. Martha Nussbaum declares that any loyalty that is derived from belonging to a particular group is a “morally questionable move of self-definition by a morally irrelevant characteristic” (Nussbaum, 1994, I). Understanding cosmopolitanism this way provokes conflict with people who are unable or unwilling to resort to pure rationality (most likely for their embeddedness in particular networks of solidarity) because it implies that helping and serving others is morally justified only if it is done for the right reasons. It is often implied in sociological debates that belonging is replaced by market fundamentalism and ethnic universalism. A prime example for this is Ulrich Beck’s formulation of ‘deformed cosmopolitanism’ (Beck, 2004). He outlines the differences between the philosophical ideal and what he calls ‘actually existing cosmopolitanism’. The latter refers to internationalized consumption and ‘banal cosmopolitanism’ (e.g. when Asians think of food, they do not only think of rice dishes), postnational politics, and global risks. While it might be true that a non-national perspective in the social sciences can shed light on inequalities not perceived under circumstances of methodological nationalism<sup>2</sup>, starting from the viewpoint of abstract equivalence thus equating globalization and internationalization with cosmopolitanism (separated only by ‘deformed’) is an unjustified move. The problem here is not that Beck would be proposing methodological cosmopolitanism to be used to analyze all social phenomena. Beck is well aware that this could have adverse effects on a researcher’s analytic potential as well when used in the wrong contexts. The problem is the reference to cosmopolitanism as it suggests that the concentration of global capital, the global AIDS crisis, human trafficking, the drug trade, etc. are imperfect versions, but still versions of the cosmopolitanism that Kant sought. There are certain elements of our contemporary world that can be seen as cosmopolitan (perhaps with some deformations) like the political unification of Europe, human rights treaties, humanitarian aid or the International Criminal Court. If however an ideal of universal justice is attached to any large scale reality, the term is deprived of its meaning. Accordingly, if people are approached from the perspective of ethical universalism and viewed as if they were the same or in essentially the same positions, it becomes difficult to understand their unique place in the world and in history.

Calhoun instead suggests a cosmopolitanism of connections. This kind of cosmopolitanism does not rely on the categorical equivalence of human beings but recognizes the relation-

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<sup>2</sup>Methodological nationalism is “the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world” (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002, p. 301). As such, it is blind to phenomena that do not fit into national categories.

ships in which people stand towards each other. Every person or group of persons has a concrete place, history, and future and has relationships with other persons or groups. However, nobody can be connected to everybody and the duties and obligations people take on are always influenced by the ways in which they are related. It is possible to actively create the future, but this can not be done in a cultural vacuum through pure rationality but only in and through relationships that are always saturated with culture. The conditions for creating a new future are not of our own choosing but determined by our situation in history. When cosmopolitanism is framed in this way, it is more robust and applicable to the real world than starting off with the abstract categorical equivalence of ethical universalism. Rather than stressing the limited aspects in which people are similar, this means a reflection of what makes people different from each other. The cosmopolitan as an affective and responsible citizen of the world does not shy away from the aspects of human nature that divide people, but navigates cultural differences looking to transform them in the direction of more openness and better capacities to connect. He uses the cultural resources from history, religion, and intellectuals to reach the highest aspiration of human culture without disrespecting those who have done so to a lesser extent. While the ethical universalist would approach a radical nationalist by stressing that foreigners are people too, the connected cosmopolitan would try to understand the nationalist's rage and may point out to him<sup>3</sup> that he is using foreigners as a scapegoat for his real problems and that generalized hatred does not solve but may actually worsen them. The biggest cosmopolitan projects today are perhaps the major religions of Christianity and Islam. They provide common languages, sets of aspirations, and occasions for connecting but do not resolve differences into simple unity. Similar things can be said about international cities that bring together travelers on different missions, local citizens, and immigrants. Calhoun points out that the cosmopolitanism of connections is not, or only partially, operationalizable as politics. Establishing global peace, battling hunger and poverty, or confronting climate change can not only be a matter of relying on structures of governance but may be better pursued through particular, partial, but necessarily overlapping solidarities. Particular projects of social integration should not be sacrificed to normative goals of equality as suggested by liberal political theory or to markets as suggested by neoliberal globalization theory (Calhoun, 2010, forthcoming). Summing up, sociology would suggest not to approach cosmopolitanism by relying on biological similarities and certainly not by reducing it to a matter of a lifestyle or framing it as something outside of culture. Rather, being a citizen of the world should mean acknowledging existing cultures, the embeddedness of individuals in particular networks of solidarities, and the patterns of material inequalities that result from them and transform these circumstances through connections to gradually develop an integrative global culture based on understanding and mutual respect.

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<sup>3</sup>For simplification and the sake of readability, only male terms are used throughout this document. Where applicable, they are to be considered generic and refer to both men and women.

### 3.3 Cosmopolitanism in CouchSurfing

As outlined in Chapter 2, the Internet can be a powerful tool through which social integration can be managed (if used correctly). Web applications can effectively serve this purpose if they actively pursue it and provide an appropriate infrastructure. Arguably the most sophisticated and persuasive secular attempt of this is the CouchSurfing network. Although the term cosmopolitanism is nowhere explicitly referred to on the CouchSurfing website (which may be due to the confusing connotations in popular culture, research, and practice), its structure, purpose, mission, and vision are entrenched in cosmopolitan ideals of openness, integration, and connection<sup>4</sup>:

*“We envision a world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections with the people and places we encounter. Building meaningful connections across cultures enables us to respond to diversity with curiosity, appreciation and respect. The appreciation of diversity spreads tolerance and creates a global community.”* – CouchSurfing Vision Statement

*“Our mission is to create Inspiring Experiences. “Inspiring Experiences” are fun, exciting and accessible experiences that stimulate people to learn and grow. Experiences of this nature encourage people to explore and connect with people and places that are different than what we’re accustomed to. If enough of us have these kinds of experiences, we may begin to see a world where people feel a greater sense of connection with each other, in spite of differences. These connections help us appreciate diversity and build a global community that is inspired to seek harmony when conflicts inevitably arise.”*

– CouchSurfing Mission

As a hospitality network, CouchSurfing is Kantian cosmopolitanism put into practice without implications from ethical universalism but with a focus on ‘meaningful connections’ and ‘inspiring experiences’. It sets a number of ground rules on how to behave towards each other and provides rituals in which others are to be engaged. It sets the framework for interaction but leaves the rest to be figured out individually. It is also marked by a renunciation of neoliberalism as it is not based on any market mechanism or reciprocity but on community ideals. Accordingly, the absence of economic interests is stressed and one of the ground rules is that accommodation is to be offered free of charge. Small gifts from surfers are permitted but not to be requested by a host.

CouchSurfing is a hospitality network trying to create a cosmopolitan community. The connection between the two is not without its problems though. Limiting cosmopolitanism to an imperative of hospitality poses an inherent problem for ideas of equality. Hospitality is an ambivalent notion because it constructs a duality between “us” and “them”,

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<sup>4</sup>In a recent version, the statements are combined and slightly altered, but the general message is the same.

alterity and belonging, membership and exclusion. Thus, the term implies limits to solidarity because of a constructed otherness. These limits are especially prevalent in liberal thought with its stress on individual freedom where “duties imposed by a community are heteronymous and legitimate only if they are based on voluntariness and reciprocity” (Friese, 2010, p.325). There are two aspects to be considered, social openness through hospitality and social closure through community. Managing these two aspects simultaneously is no easy task especially when participation is entirely voluntary. To make this possible, CouchSurfing has created a cosmopolitan ‘project identity’. Project identities are formed “when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by doing so, seek the transformation of overall social structure” (Castells, 2010b, p. 8). These identities used to develop from civil society, but in the network society they typically derive from communal resistance. In the case of CouchSurfing, it is resistance against narrow-mindedness, nationalism, and the selfishness of mainstream society. The first aspect is especially prevalent as open-mindedness is a term regularly used in self descriptions and as a positive reference after a successful CouchSurfing experience.

Calhoun declares that a responsible citizen of the world, a cosmopolitan, is eager to learn and connect. As I have shown, this ideal is pursued by the CouchSurfing community as well and deeply rooted in its self-understanding. Still, the question remains to what extent it is reflected by empirical reality. In addition, taking into account the web-based nature of CouchSurfing, it is necessary to explore if the relationships between members are encumberable. Solidarity implies the ability for a social relationship to endure hardships. Connections established and maintained on the Internet often fall under suspicion of not being meaningful for individuals. Since a consistent approach on the encumbrance capacity of social relationships is missing as of yet, the next chapter is meant to provide a framework for its analysis.



## 4 The Encumbrance Capacity of Social Relationships

*It's not who you know Bob, it's how you know them!* – Faceman (A-Team)

Recent scientific debates about the challenges of modern technology have generated a body of theories and methods to analyze and make sense of emerging social phenomena. Popular examples include Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society*, Manuel Castell's *Network Society*, or Granovetter's *The Strength of Weak Ties* (Beck, 2006; Castells, 2010c; Granovetter, 1973, 1983). Bourdieu's notion of social capital has also had a huge impact on contemporary sociological thinking. They are important contributions but focus mainly on the relationships themselves and fail to consequently acknowledge the resources that can or cannot be activated within these relationships. Bourdieu extends the notion of capital to include social and cultural resources and states that they can be converted into one another under certain circumstances, but sophisticated research on how this is accomplished is not yet available. Granovetter's distinction between weak and strong ties is a useful tool as well, but its construction as a function of invested time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal services is problematic. In this definition, people can have a strong connection between one another without feeling responsible to administer help when times get rough. It uses reciprocity as a measure for a strong relationship although this seems more applicable to business relationships than to friendship. When trying to understand social inequality or how social hardships can be alleviated by relying on one's strong ties, this is a fundamental flaw. A growing number of empirical and theoretical analyses in the social sciences rely on a rationalist view of human relationships in which people's ultimate motivation is the maximization of their individual benefit. Thus, it is not surprising that in Granovetter's construction, strong ties are no more than a network of frequent and/or intense interaction. However, the reality of a strong connection differs considerably from this perception and is too narrow, especially when talking about communities and networks of solidarity. It seems more useful to approach matters of community by constructing strong ties as those which are able to provide for each other when times get rough. The encumbrance capacity of social relationships can fill this theoretical and methodological void because it is a concept that can adequately grasp potential and actual solidarity and considers non-reciprocal transfer of goods and services as well. Social science has created a large body of research on individualization and the atom-

ization of the individual. Processes driving that change are increasing division of labor, the deinstitutionalization of the family, secularization, and, in more recent debates, the diminishing power of the nation state. It can be argued these support networks simply disappear, leaving individuals alienated from one another, but human beings are above all social creatures with a profound need for social interaction, closeness, and trust. Scholars regularly argue that people's ultimate end is their own benefit regardless of others and that altruism is merely self-interest in disguise. When people do good deeds, they do not do it for the sake of the other person, but because they can feel good about themselves afterwards or expect something in return at some later point in time. This can be seen as a resemblance of Hobbes' negative view of the natural law where the state of nature is a state of war. People would kill and murder each other in a constant struggle for resources if it wasn't for some kind of social contract rationally put in place to organize and govern social life and the distribution of goods. Hobbes rests his assumptions on observations in nature and especially in the realm of animals where he sees only violence, brutality, and the will to survive (Hobbes, 1976). However, even among animals, acts of self-sacrifice can be observed and helping others, caring, understanding, and providing support is indeed part of human nature as well and does not need to be forced upon the individual by a social contract. When Hobbes takes up the notion of *homo hominis lupus* (man is the wolf of man), he fails to recognize that wolves themselves are actually very social creatures. In the state of nature which present a constant struggle over scarce resources it is not the strongest individual who survives but the strongest community which can best provide for its members. Kropotkin (1972) even praises mutual aid as the most important factor . Thus, both cooperation and self-interest are part of human nature and when embeddedness in traditional forms of social support structures loses importance, altruistic behavior does not simply cease to exist, although this is implied by some contemporary scholars. If Beck (1992) is to be believed and the modern (Western) world is marked by rational individualism where everyone is responsible for their own fate and people provide for others only if it holds a benefit for themselves, we should find little evidence of altruistic behavior. However, the processes of deinstitutionalization rather create an ever greater need for relationships that can be counted on and solidarity merely takes on different forms. There need to be functional equivalents to the support structures that families, professions, etc. provided. The problem for social scientific analysis is to identify these functional equivalents and to answer the question if these equivalents actually pluralize because the deinstitutionalization of traditional forms of embeddedness may just as likely be accompanied by an institutionalization of new ones. Granovetter offers a convenient way to deal with these problems but his definition of a strong relationship is based on reciprocity, thus focusing on bilateral exchange. His model is useful but overlooks an important aspect of strong relationships; their encumbrance capacity. If a sophisticated research approach based on the encumbrance capacity of social relationships is developed and consequently applied, the question can be answered if contemporary developments

(with globalization as the most prominent one) are leading to a loss, liberalization, or transformation of community.

## 4.1 Friendship and Solidarity

The root of this concept is Aristotle's notion of friendship as described in the *Nicomachian Ethics*. He explains that friendship is not just a mere relationship of exchange but also accounts for unilateral transfer of resources. Aristotle points out that loving others is only possible if one loves himself and everyone is their own best friend. However, true friendship is based on regarding the friend as an *allos autos* (another self), making the motivation to help that person obvious (Aristotle, 1995, IX, 4). This is how the gap between selfishness and altruism is bridged. It also implies a whole different understanding of friendship and strong ties because it puts the focus on the extent to which people are willing to help each other regardless of their own benefit. Others are loved for their own sake and by helping them, the individual helps himself. Therefore, the amount of resources that can be activated in a relationship based on friendship is far greater than for other types of relationships. This is in contrast to norms of reciprocity which cannot satisfyingly explain prolonged altruistic behavior. Aristotle goes even further by pointing out that reciprocity and friendship are two completely different concepts. When something is expected from a friend in return for given acts of friendship, it means that the friend is only loved for the sake of pleasure and that the ego is only loved for the sake of utility, and if these purposes of the friendship are no longer met, it will dissolve (Aristotle, 1995, IX, 1). For true friends in an Aristotelian sense, this is not the case and acts of solidarity are given in accordance with the friend's needs and not with one's own expected benefit. Thus, the encumbrance capacity of a social relationship is closely related to the degree (or quality) of a friendship. This does not mean that reciprocity does not happen in a friendship but it is much more a by-product than a constitutive element.

## 4.2 Concept

An encumberable relationship shall therefore be defined as a relationship that does not dissolve when it is put to the test by social or economic hardships and through which resources can be activated regardless of immediate or future returns. A particular social relationship can then be placed in a continuum of encumbrance capacity. The lowest encumbrance capacity is present if a person will not provide goods or services for another without appropriate compensation. Such would be true for individuals who act out of pure, benefit maximizing rationality. Although a common strain of research (Rational Choice Theory) constructs social reality in a way that every human being exhibits this behavior towards everyone else, I want to make clear that this is not the case and that

this construction is misleading and potentially dangerous. By oversimplifying reality to fit the assumptions it also provides legitimization for neoliberal individualism (“It is okay for me to think only of my own benefit because everyone else does it too”). Combined with the capitalist mode of production, this ideology produces vast social inequality due to the mechanisms of accumulation of capital. Encumberable relationships on the other hand elude these mechanisms through acts of solidarity, even though encumberable relationships have other effects as well. For example, they imply ingroup/outgroup differentiation and social closure. The highest degree of encumbrance capacity is reached when a person is willing to give his/her own life for that of another person. Thus, radical groups presumably show high levels of encumbrance capacity with suicide bombers as the most extreme form. Since belonging to groups is a major part of one’s definition of self, it is feasible to include collectives in the definition as well. An encumberable relationship can therefore be established with another person but also with a group. This is the case, especially when there is a strong attachment to the collective identity provided by the group.

Due to the close relation to ideas of friendship, the most encumberable relationships are to be expected among friends and family members. Encumbrance capacity is high towards collectives if they are a significant part of one’s identity. Individual encumberable relationships with members of a collective in turn facilitate identification. Once an encumberable relationship is established, solidarity can take on different forms, namely the three forms of human capital (economic, social, and cultural). The relationship itself resembles social capital with a high potential of leading to an increase in other forms of capital. Put simply, a friend will share money, resources, and knowledge if needed. The higher the degree of friendship, the more capital can be activated. It is also important to note that encumbrance capacity is structurally limited for any given relationship. People who own large amounts of capital can also activate more for their relationships than those who do not. Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate between the absolute and the relative encumbrance capacity of a relationship. Absolute encumbrance capacity refers to the actual amount of capital that can be activated, while relative encumbrance capacity is the share of one’s overall capital. Thus, if a relationship with high relative encumbrance capacity develops between a poor and a rich person, this should have an equalizing effect on their social inequality.

The reduction of complexity is accomplished by abstracting from individual intentions. For the encumbrance capacity of social relationships, it is not important whether an individual wants to invest time and resources into a relationship, like children who do not want to visit grandma but are forced to by their parents or wealthy people who give to charity because of a feeling of obligation. Social norms can facilitate pro-social behavior and induce encumbrance capacity but not to an extent that relations of friendship as sketched out by Aristotle can. In any case, encumberable relationships have an equalizing effect on social inequalities beyond institutionalized methods of redistribution. This does not mean they can be seen as a suitable alternative to systems of social welfare, but they

can alleviate risks and social hardships when no such system is available.

### 4.3 Trust

The aspect of trust requires special attention because it is closely related to notions of community and the encumbrance capacity of social relationships. As Fukuyama (1996, p. 26) states:

*“Trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community.”*

Another definition by Bradach and Eccles (1989, p. 104) reads:

*“Trust is an expectation that alleviates the fear that one’s exchange partner will act opportunistically.”*

In other words, trust is the expectation of non-selfish behavior on the part of others. It is generated through a generalization of past experiences and information available in the present but still presents a risk (Luhmann, 1989). Any relationship is subject to a problem of trust since it is possible that the trusted person does not act on the needs of the truster. If this problem is anticipated, no help will be administered to begin with (Jäckel and Mai, 2005). Trust is thus an important requirement for an encumberable relationship. Accordingly, violation of trust is the biggest threat to an encumberable relationship. The most common form of violation of trust is dishonesty and this is of much greater importance than reciprocity. It is far more acceptable for a friend not to be able to repay goods and services than if they are used to achieve ends not anticipated by the giver. This is true even for relationships with a low encumbrance capacity. If someone wants to help a homeless person by giving him money, he will only do so if he trusts that it will not be used to buy drugs and alcohol. In any case, high trust leads to high encumbrance capacity while low trust leads to low encumbrance capacity. Trust is also an essential aspect of online communities and high-trust societies are better able to take advantage of the efficiencies offered by modern information technology (Preece, 2000; Fukuyama, 1996). The notion of encumbrance capacity of social relationships yields an explanation for this relationship because it is not trust itself but the actions that result from it which lead to communal effectiveness, stability and protection against dysfunctional, external forces.

### 4.4 Measurement

In order to validate the arguments set forth here, it is necessary to provide a solid empirical basis. The present analysis of the CouchSurfing community includes empirical

markers for the encumbrance capacity of social relationships, but the indicators used are neither methodologically perfect nor exhaustive. Their inclusion is merely a starting point and meant to encourage further engagement with the concept. It is the beginning of a hermeneutic circle which can lead to a better understanding of society and community in the age of globalization, digitalization, and networking.

In practice, measuring the encumbrance capacity of a given relationship is not an easy task. Experimental designs that test how much adversity a given relationship can handle before it is dissolved would hold severe ethical issues and once the point of dissolution is reached, any further investigation of the relationship is rendered impossible. The analysis would destroy its object of interest. Thus, measurement can only be an approximation of the true value. Two sets of indicators seem useful in accomplishing this: hard indicators and soft indicators. Hard indicators include the resources and information that are actually being activated in a given relationship. Those resources that go beyond what can be expected from social norms (like the norm of reciprocity) are of particular interest. This method also requires a differentiation between absolute and relative encumbrance capacity as described above. Only relative encumbrance capacity should be used in order to ensure comparability. Suitable soft indicators deal with the subjective evaluation of the relationship. This includes the perceived degree of friendship and the extent of trust. When using soft indicators, one should be wary not to overinterpret the findings. Any subjective evaluation is subject to a problem of interpretation by the subject. What might resemble a close friendship for one person can be a whole different thing for another. This problem intensifies even further if the population analyzed has a diverse cultural background or habitus. An intermediary position is held by questions that target potential solidarity. They refer to an objective measure because they ask about an actual amount of money, time, etc. but contain a subjective component as well since they are hypothetical. They could, for example, take the form of the amount of money that the respondent would be willing to spend if a friend is in trouble. Even though questions like this face the problem of social desirability and hypothetical questions in general are methodologically questionable, this way of operationalization may yield useful results if direct measurement of the encumbrance capacity of social relationships is intended and objective measures are not available.

## 4.5 Context

The present concept is meant to encourage the reader to think differently about relationships. It should be considered an additional approach which may yield strong explanatory power when applied to appropriate contexts. Examples include the analysis of communities and networks in which solidarity is a constitutive part. Especially in online contexts, where interaction can be frequent, emotionally intense, and intimate but at the same time relationships can be dissolved quite easily if they are put to the test, the encumbrance

capacity of social relationships enables the researcher to differentiate between casual, superficial contact and meaningful connection. Furthermore, communities which are able to establish encumberable relationships between their members and towards the collective should prove more enduring and stable than those who are not. This applies to online as well as offline communities (or any intermediary) and is especially relevant if participation is voluntary.

For the present analysis, the encumbrance capacity of social relationships plays a significant role because it can explain why and how the CouchSurfing network is able to function without institutionalized obligations. There are no rules on how many times a person can surf without hosting and in fact, any kind of participation is voluntary. Large groups that produce a public good (like in this case couches available for surfing) are always subject to a free-rider problem. This problem intensifies in online contexts because of relative anonymity and low exit barriers. Norms of reciprocity can alleviate but not resolve this problem since they are variable for different people. In the long run, reciprocally acting individuals will give up on their engagement if their investment of time and resources does not match the outcome and the community will cease to function. By looking at the encumberable relationships, explanations can be found for the question what keeps a community strong and able to function despite the problems that arise from open access to collective goods. Encumberable relationships trigger identification with the ideals of the community, like the cosmopolitan norm of hospitality, and facilitate pro-social behavior towards other members of the community as well. CouchSurfing works because of the promise of encumberable relationships, of meeting people that can be counted on, and long-term, active participation is encouraged if this promise is fulfilled. It brings together people seeking not only a place to stay when on vacation but those who seek adventure and connection and who are willing to keep an open mind towards cultural diversity. People who do not fit this description either adapt or select themselves out.

Closely related to the encumbrance capacity of social relationships, trust is a central concern in online environments as well. On the one hand, anonymity and the absence of facial expressions and gestures in many instances of virtual interaction limit trust. On the other hand, online environments are suitable for providing measures of trust through reputation systems. Ebay was one the first large scale project to implement a reputation system and though not fully protected against abuse has proven effective in inducing trustworthy behavior (Resnick and Zeckhauser, 2002). Additionally, the public display of trustworthiness can also be seen as a gamification of cooperative behavior. Gamification is “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (Deterding et al., 2011) with the goal of improving user experience and encouraging user engagement. Collecting achievements and their public display are crucial elements in almost every successful contemporary MMOG (Massive Multiplayer Online Game) and are increasingly implemented in single player games as well. Both Sony and Nintendo are successfully using achievements in their gaming consoles and ranking lists can be said to account for the success story of Blizzard

with multiplayer titles like World of Warcraft or Diablo (II and III). These mechanisms also work well in browser games that are less advanced in terms of gameplay and graphics. When reputation and trustworthiness is managed in the same way, it provides incentives for people to conform to the commonly shared norms of the community. Research has yet to determine the significance of this phenomenon in non-gaming contexts, but hunting for references may contribute to proactive engagement in the CouchSurfing community as well.

The electronic interdependencies of our contemporary world can only form a global village if encumberable social relationships are formed or, as Max Weber would put it, if the network society is turned into a digitally empowered community<sup>1</sup>. However, it is only possible to imagine the global village as a single community under conditions of ethical universalism, so it may be more useful to think of it more as a conglomerate of different communities. The agency and influence of a single such community is determined by its size and by the encumbrance capacity of the relationships within and towards the collective. The character of the global village is determined by the types of communities it is made up of. McLuhan (1994) imagined it to resemble a kind of new tribalism marked by small, secluded communities and increased conflict, but if global means of connection with collectively shared rules of interaction are established where diversity is not met with hostility but with a reflection of differences, there may yet be hope for the cosmopolitan dream. Conflicts arise in any social setting but the means of resolving them can differ (e.g. violence vs. discourse). The development of encumberable relationships between people from different cultural backgrounds as encouraged by the CouchSurfing platform would be a strong indicator for the feasibility of integrative cosmopolitanism.

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<sup>1</sup>The remark refers to Weber's distinction between communal and associative relationships (Weber, 1978, ch. 1, §9).



## 5 Data and Methods

Nussbaum (1994, p. 1) defines a cosmopolitan as a “person whose primary allegiance is to the community of human beings in the entire world”. This definition corresponds to the kind of members CouchSurfing wants to attract. However, the ideological direction of a network and Web 2.0 platform that is open to everyone with internet access is largely dependent on the users themselves. Innovations in information and communication technology (ICT) can favor decentralization, flattening of hierarchies, and the empowerment of human beings but must not necessarily do so. The usage reality of ICTs is influenced by complex power relationships and circumstances not related to the purpose and structure of, for example, an internet application (Kalantzis-Cope and Gherab-Martín, 2011). For the analysis of CouchSurfing, this means that there may be profound differences between intended outcomes and usage reality, which is especially true considering that the network consists of over 4 million members from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, an empirical analysis can not be limited to a description of the goals of the community and the possibilities that CouchSurfing offers, but has to compare it with information on actual attitudes and behavior. The first step in approaching the subject was explorative fieldwork. I created a profile and tried to experience every aspect of CouchSurfing myself though maintaining critical distance to my object of study. I surfed, hosted, met with travelers for a quick chat, took part in small, ritualized meetings and big, organized events. I also read through discussion boards and polls offered on the platform. During this time I conducted informal, qualitative interviews with CouchSurfing enthusiasts and passive members, first-time and long-term surfers and hosts, regular members and experts like City Ambassadors who are responsible for managing local affairs. This gave me a first (though limited) impression of what CouchSurfing is really about in practice, how members are similar, how they are different, and how they reflect their own membership and the community in general with respect to matters of community and the cosmopolitan mission. I talked to them about the activities they underwent during the course of their CouchSurfing experiences, the problems they encountered and how they dealt with them, and about the nature of the relationships that developed (or did not develop). Through my experiences with the community as well as by reviewing literature on cosmopolitanism, community, and the Internet, I was able to create a theoretically and practically informed quantitative survey suitable to answer my research questions. The quantitative approach was selected because it yields a higher sample size and thus broadens the scope of the analysis. Furthermore, quantitative measures open up the possibility of controlling for

representivity and increase generalizability. They also allow for the discovery of meta effects that are not explicitly reflected by the members.

## 5.1 Survey Study

The survey was administered in form of a standardized online questionnaire and was available from February to April, 2012. Online surveying is a comfortable and efficient way to gain information but for many research interests it also implies selectivity because people without internet access are, by design, excluded from the analysis. Yet in this case, the base population consists of internet users only, rendering the problem irrelevant. Prior to the main study, a pretest was conducted in January 2012 to resolve remaining technical and methodological issues. It was taken by six CouchSurfing members to control for matters of content and six sociologists to ensure empirical accuracy. The participants were able to comment on each question they thought problematic and were asked to evaluate the whole survey in terms of length and interestingness:

Table 5.1: Length

The questionnaire is too long/time consuming		
	Frequency	Percent
strongly disagree	2	16.67%
disagree	8	66.67%
neither agree nor disagree	0	0.00%
agree	1	8.33%
strongly agree	1	8.33%
Total	12	100.00%

Table 5.2: Interestingness

The questionnaire is interesting		
	Frequency	Percent
strongly disagree	0	0.00%
disagree	0	0.00%
neither agree nor disagree	2	16.67%
agree	7	58.33%
strongly agree	3	25.00%
Total	12	100.00%

The questionnaire was administered in English only, which causes a certain selectivity

effects. This effect should, however, be mild to negligible because the majority of CouchSurfing members (70.5%) speak the English language. Concerning the circulation of the survey, CouchSurfing officials were contacted about the possibility to publicly advertise the questionnaire link without success, so participants were acquired through a number of other channels. Personal contacts were asked to fill out the questionnaire and send the online link to their CouchSurfing contacts. 120 of these mediated contacts were sent a personal invitation yielding a return rate of  $\sim 95\%$  for this group (115 surveys). Additionally, the link was posted in social networking sites (Facebook, etc.) and in discussion boards on the CouchSurfing platform. The latter postings were made in the boards of the ten countries and ten cities with the largest amount of CouchSurfers to reach as many potential participants as possible. During the data collection phase, my CouchSurfing profile was anonymized, stripped of all information that could influence the participants answers, and served as a reference for the study to stress the fact that it is a genuine scientific research and to offer an additional opportunity to provide feedback. The questions in the survey revolve around six central issues and various indicators were used to analyze each topic:

- Cosmopolitanism
- Conformity with CouchSurfing Ideals
- Involvement and Level of Activity
- Encumbrance Capacity of Social Relationships
- Norms of Reciprocity
- Sociodemography

Internet communities have not received proper scientific attention as of yet, which is why the present analysis is meant to give an extensive overview of the relevant topics rather than an in-depth investigation of one particular aspect. Accordingly, statistics mostly remain at a descriptive level (frequencies, crosstabulations, correlations, and group comparisons).

## 5.2 Sample

The sample consists of 480 cases, 21 of which said they did not have a profile with CouchSurfing. These were dropped along with 88 cases who did not finish the survey and showed a high level of missing values, leaving a net sample of 371 cases. It includes people who have surfed (41 cases), people who have hosted (41 cases), people who have done both (257 cases), and people who have not had any CouchSurfing experience (32 cases). Case sizes may be lower for particular variables as a consequence of nonresponse

but this is no serious issue with an average percentage of missing values of 1.57%. As suggested by the acquisition strategy, the sample is non-random meaning that not every CouchSurfer had the same chance to enter the sample. Accordingly, when interpreting the results the reader should keep in mind that the findings are not fully representative of the base population (i.e. all CouchSurfers). Ultimately, this is only a minor shortcoming which can not be expected to have a severe impact on the validity of the findings. In fact, comparisons with official statistics provided by the platform<sup>1</sup> even show similar ratios for most of the relevant sociodemographic characteristics. The age structure is only slightly biased towards older members and differences in gender ratios are negligible.

Table 5.3: Age (sample)

Age (sample)		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
18-24 years	98	26.63%
25-29 years	139	37.77%
30-34 years	63	17.12%
35-39 years	26	7.07%
40-49 years	26	7.07%
50-59 years	11	2.99%
60-69 years	3	0.82%
70-79 years	1	0.27%
older than 79 years	1	0.27%
<b>Total</b>	<b>368</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Mean: 30 years, Median: 28 years

Table 5.4: Age (official)

Age (official)		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
18-24 years	1,409,505	34.90%
25-29 years	1,392,058	34.50%
30-34 years	623,471	15.40%
35-39 years	259,873	6.40%
40-49 years	211,963	5.20%
50-59 years	90,076	2.20%
60-69 years	31,073	0.80%
70-79 years	4,370	0.10%

<sup>1</sup>Official statistics are updated daily and were recorded on the last day of the sampling period.

older than 79 years	824	0.00%
Average age (official statistics): 28 years		

Table 5.5: Sex (sample)

	Sex (sample)	
	Frequency	Percent
Male	175	47.68%
Female	192	52.32%
Total	367	100.00%

Table 5.6: Sex (official)

	Sex (official)	
	Frequency	Percent
Male	2,051,649	50.80%
Female	1,739,700	43.10%
Several People	234,437	5.80%

The sample contains a higher percentage of Europeans than the base population (65.05% vs. 50.9%), but all relevant groups are sufficiently represented. The most problematic bias is the overrepresentation of verified users. To get verified, users make a donation to the network and get a postcard with a verification code sent to an address of their choice. Once the code is entered, a badge is added to the CouchSurfing profile displaying the verification status. The fee is variable according to the Purchasing Power Parity and Human Development Index of the country of registration and amounts to  $\sim 25$ \$ for US citizens. Since overrepresentation of verified users in the sample is a known problem, group comparison can be used to control for any distorting effects.

Table 5.7: World Region (sample)

	World Region (sample)	
	Frequency	Percent
Europe	242	65.23%
North America	42	11.32%
South America	19	5.12%
Central Asia	9	2.43%
Oceania	9	2.43%
Southeast Asia	14	3.77%
Africa	11	2.96%
Middle East	13	3.50%
Other	12	3.23%
Total	371	100.00%

Table 5.8: World Region (official)

	World Region (official)	
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Europe	2,055,812	50.90%
North America	1,070,514	26.50%
South America	266,240	6.60%
Central Asia	246,807	6.10%
Oceania	134,811	3.30%
Southeast Asia	99,952	2.50%
Africa	73,264	1.80%
Middle East	65,402	1.60%
Central America	19,923	0.50%
Antarctic Region	140	0.00%

- Verified Users (official): 7.8%
- Verified Users (sample): 37.5%

The official numbers show that CouchSurfing is a phenomenon mostly prevalent in Western, industrialized countries. Europe and North America (where CouchSurfing originally started) account for over 75% of the member base. In comparison, despite a high overall population, Asians make up only 8.6% of all CouchSurfing members. The age structure indicates a high popularity of CouchSurfing among young people with an average age of 28 years and only  $\sim 3\%$  aged 50 years and older. The gender ratio is close to even. Further sociodemographic characteristics exclusively measured in the survey include occupational status, residential area, and years of education. The findings indicate that CouchSurfing members are highly educated with a mean education of 14.85 years. The high numbers of students in the network (29%) also point to this conclusion. In terms of occupation, this figure is the most remarkable aspect and can serve as an explanation for the age- and educational structure.

Table 5.9: Occupation

	What is your current occupation?	
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Employed of wages	158	42.59%
Self-employed	44	11.86%
Student	106	28.57%
Homemaker	3	0.81%

Retired	3	0.81%
Out of work	26	7.01%
Other	31	8.36%
Total	371	100.00%

Table 5.10: Area

What residential area do you live in?		
	Frequency	Percent
Rural	29	7.82%
Suburban	57	15.36%
Urban	285	76.82%
Total	371	100.00%

A look at the residential areas reveals that an unusually large percentage of CouchSurfers lives in urban areas (77%). However, this fact is not surprising since cities figure most prominently for travel and/or hosting travelers. The proportions are also much in accordance with typical patterns of the Digital Divide, suggesting the conclusion that people with a generally high affinity towards the Internet are also more inclined to use CouchSurfing. Summing up, the findings indicate that CouchSurfing is most common among students and young professionals in Western, urban settings.

Another aspect that deserves attention and can be classified as sociodemography in this context is the CouchSurfing experience statistics. In the sample, the average CouchSurfer has hosted 7 times, surfed 4 times, met for coffee or drinks 5 times and has 17 people in their CouchSurfing friends list. These numbers are based on the median which is a more reliable predictor than the mean in this case because it is not as sensitive to outliers, i.e. people with extremely high (or low) values. The true values for the base population is expected to be slightly lower than the values in the sample because verified users (which are overrepresented) tend to be more active. However, group comparison shows that the distorting effects are minimal.

Table 5.11: CouchSurfing Summary

Variable	Median	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Times hosted	7	25.35	60.58	0	600	371
Times surfed	4	10.39	16.15	0	100	371
Times met for drink/coffee	5	24.75	86.14	0	1000	368

*Continued on next page...*

... table 5.11 continued

Variable	Median	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Number of CS friends	17	44.55	76.23	0	516	370

Table 5.12: Median CS Statistics by Verification Status

	Verification		
	Yes	No	Overall
Hosted	15	5	7
Surfed	6	4	4
Coffee/Drinks	6.5	5	5
Friends	28	12	17

Table 5.13: Types of CouchSurfing Experiences

	Categories of CouchSurfing Experiences	
	Frequency	Percent
Only hosting	41	11.05%
Only surfing	41	11.05%
Both hosting and surfing	257	69.27%
No CouchSurfing experience	32	8.63%
Total	371	100.00%

There are also differences in the ways CouchSurfing is used. The sample indicates that most CouchSurfers (69%) participate in both hosting and surfing. However, some members have used the site only for surfing and an equal amount of people has exclusively hosted other people (11%). A few members (~9%) have neither hosted nor surfed. Another notable finding is that only 1% of the CouchSurfers in the sample have not had any offline encounter via the network (surfing, hosting, meeting travelers for a drink or coffee, or participating in activities).

### 5.3 Constructed Variables

To distinguish between network- and communal participation, it was necessary to construct a *core-periphery dummy*. Those at the core participate in shared activities, while those at the periphery show low levels of involvement. The empirical equivalent is a con-



structured variable that includes information about participation in meetings and events as well as information about special statuses. Those who attend meetings and gatherings at least every half year and/or hold a special status<sup>2</sup> are defined as being at the core of the community. This group makes up 59% of the sample population, thus, over 50% of CouchSurfers engage in frequent communal activity within the network.

Another difficult task is the measurement of cosmopolitanism. The foremost important question in this respect is to what extent world citizenship is part of the identity of CouchSurfers. Do they consider themselves citizens of the world or are there other geographical units that are more important for their conception of self? To answer this question, participants were asked whether they identify more with their local communities, their nation, their respective supranational union (Europe, Asia, etc.), or with humanity as a whole. Answers were provided in the form of a ranking from highest to lowest impact on the conception of self. The resulting variable shows which rank is attributed to identification with 'All Humans'. A detailed analysis of the findings is provided in section 6.2.

In order for the CouchSurfing concept to work, there has to be available accommodation as well as travelers who use it. However, not everyone participates equally in surfing and hosting and for some analyses it is useful to be able to distinguish between those who surf and those who host more often. From the data on the total number of surfing and hosting experiences, a ratio was calculated that makes these differences empirically comprehensible. The absolute hosting ratio refers to the number of surfings subtracted from the number of hosting experiences. Positive values show how many more times someone has offered his couch while negative values signify that someone has used CouchSurfing more often for surfing. In addition, by dividing this ratio by the total number of CouchSurfing experiences, the relative hosting ratio was calculated. This way, the values are made to range from -1 to +1 and allow for better individual comparisons.

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<sup>2</sup>Statuses are signified by profile badges and given for doing community volunteer work like IT specialist, CS Team Member, City Ambassador, etc. The "Verified" status is excluded because it does not require interaction with the community but only signals that a donation has been made.

## 6 The CouchSurfing Community

*Please, therefore, to say what sort of community you mean. [...] for we are of opinion that the right or wrong management of such matters will have a great and paramount influence on the State for good or for evil – Plato (Republic)*

As mentioned earlier, CouchSurfing sets out to create a global community based on tolerance and respect through inspiring experiences and meaningful connections. This ambitious project is ultimately a cosmopolitan quest for world peace based on humanist ideals. It has much in common with religious movements and can be seen as a secular alternative to these existing forms of cosmopolitan community formation. Even more importantly, CouchSurfing makes use of modern ICTs to enable organization of activities and govern members (including the provision of means of self-governance). ICTs, if used correctly, improve efficiency for whichever purpose they are designed and bear the potential of creating communities and shaping identities (Porter, 1997). If and how this is the case for CouchSurfing will be analyzed in the following chapter. Backed up by empirical data from the specially designed online survey, questions of cosmopolitan identities and cosmopolitan behavior will be answered. Do CouchSurfers see themselves as cosmopolitans? Are the cosmopolitan values a matter of learning and internalization of norms or a matter of self-selection of people who already share a cosmopolitan attitude prior to entering the network? Put in other words, does CouchSurfing produce cosmopolitans or does it simply provide cosmopolitans with better capacities to connect? Closely related are questions of society vs. community. Is CouchSurfing a tightly knit community of people with a cosmopolitan lifestyle or an open-access tool to organize the sharing of a common good? Since the former aspect is stressed as a goal, what mechanisms are used to create a sense of community and how effective are they? What role does reciprocity play? The analysis and discussion provide the reader with a better understanding of community formation on the Internet on the one hand and broader societal implications of cosmopolitanism in a global era on the other.

### 6.1 Technical Structure

CouchSurfing as a platform is a typical example of a social networking site (SNS) with a structure much like Facebook. As such, it is an example of a new form of government of social interactions and connections which holds various social ramifications. These are

especially relevant for young people, for whom embeddedness in digital context is part of their socialization process (Cachia and Haché, 2011)<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, there are differences in popularity which result partly from path dependency (crowds draw crowds) but also depend on the mechanisms encouraging participation. The latter aspect involves how the platforms are organized in terms of who can interact with whom (access barriers), how people can interact (discussion boards, chats, profile walls, etc.), how trust is generated (explicit management of trust), what and how much people can reveal about themselves to whom (e.g. issues of privacy and anonymity), and which groups of people are targeted (purpose). SNSs with a particular goals typically have a smaller member base than those with a broad definition of purpose. For example, the stated purpose of Facebook is to “connect and share with the people in your life” which can mean everything or nothing. On the other hand, “communities that have clearly stated goals appear to attract people with similar goals and who are often like each other; this creates a stable community in which there is less hostility” (Preece, 2000, p. 81). This section analyzes how CouchSurfing manages social interaction and which implications the structure holds for the aspects relevant to the discussion of cosmopolitanism and the encumbrance capacity of social relationships.

### 6.1.1 Identity Management

Like every SNS, the heart of the platform and the first step when joining the network is the online profile. This is where individual identity management happens. Users create a profile by filling out various categories with which they can present themselves to possible hosts and surfers. Besides sociodemographic characteristics like age, gender, ethnicity, place of residence, spoken languages, occupation, and education, members can upload pictures, give a personal description, and display their interests and taste in music, films, and literature. They can also join groups which are displayed in the profile. Additionally, members can leave extensive information about their living arrangements so surfers have a clear idea of the circumstances they can expect upon their arrival. This includes the availability of accommodation, children, pets, shared rooms or sleeping surfaces, preferred gender, permission to smoke, etc. A special section also encourages users to post a picture and description of the *couch* if the user is interested in hosting. Furthermore, the profile includes a list of *friends*, which represents the personal network on the platform. Unlike many other SNSs, CouchSurfing requires its users to give a detailed account of every friendship that is established including information on how long people have known each other, how they met, and how close they are. In most SNSs, the tendency now is to give an account of one’s *real* self (Cachia and Haché, 2011). This tendency is especially strong in CouchSurfing because it is harder to hide one’s true identity when the prospect

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<sup>1</sup>At this point it should be noted that this applies largely to Western, industrialized societies or, more specifically speaking, this finding varies profoundly along the lines of the Digital Divide

is to meet other people in person. CouchSurfing offers the option to block messages and CouchRequests from people who do not have a completed profile, thus encouraging members to reveal as much information as possible. The idea behind this is that the more information is revealed the more trustable a person appears. The question of trust is an important one, especially upon entering the network<sup>2</sup>. As noted in section 4.3, it is also a crucial requirement for any encumberable relationship. Certain sections are more suited for displaying trustworthiness than others. “Opinion on the CouchSurfing.org Project” and “How I Participate in CS” can be used to show the level of commitment to the commonly shared values in the community. Other methods of signaling trustworthiness become relevant after some CouchSurfing experiences. An important section of the online profile are references. Similar to Ebay, CouchSurfing uses a reputation system which allows members to rate others with whom they had encounters of whatever sort. The references can be positive, neutral, or negative. CouchSurfing also gives out badges called “Personal/Community Designations” for various achievements within the network. The easiest way to earn such a badge is the verification process as described in section 5.2. The badge with the highest impact on trustworthiness is the one which signals that the person is vouched for. Only people who have received at least three vouches themselves can vouch for others whom they regard as especially trustworthy. Other badges can be earned by further participation in the community through volunteer work as a city ambassador, IT specialist, etc.. Ultimately, the four methods of building up a reputation and signaling trustworthiness are the following (sorted from lowest to highest impact):

1. Verification
2. References
3. Complete disclosure of one’s identity
4. Vouching

The cosmopolitan character of the network is revealed by some of the identity management categories. “Teach, Learn, Share” can be used to describe individual skills or knowledge a member can teach others or is trying to learn himself. Information in this category signals that a member is able and willing to make a personal contribution so that the community can thrive and/or that he is interested in the cultural resources the world has to offer. This is part of the cosmopolitan idea of learning to navigate cultural differences. Another indicator is the possibility to describe one’s “Current Mission”. This shows that CouchSurfing makes an effort to connect people on different missions. Furthermore, CouchSurfing allows for a detailed display of existing cultural knowledge in the form of traveled locations. In this section, members can list places they have visited, places they

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<sup>2</sup>A detailed analysis of the connection between trust and truthfulness in online environments can be found in (Myskja, 2011).

have lived at, places they want to visit, and places that they are going to visit. The specially designed profile sections that allow people to describe themselves also force people to come to terms with the role they want to play in the community. The careful management of one’s identity is crucial for being accepted as a suitable surfer or host. This creates a double bind for members. They should conform to the values of the community while revealing their true identity at the same time. Labor market research has coined the phrase “functional authenticity” to refer to this phenomenon (see Voswinkel, 2008), which can also be witnessed in the empirical analysis of CouchSurfing.

Table 6.1: Presentation of Self

	When I couchsurf I try to present myself in the best possible way		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cum. Percent</b>
strongly disagree	1	0.28%	0.28%
disagree	16	4.47%	4.75%
neither agree nor disagree	68	18.99%	23.74%
agree	168	46.93%	70.67%
strongly agree	105	29.33%	100.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>358</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	

Table 6.2: Authenticity

	When I’m among couchsurfers I can be myself		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cum. Percent</b>
strongly disagree	4	1.13%	1.13%
disagree	11	3.10%	4.23%
neither agree nor disagree	92	25.92%	30.14%
agree	163	45.92%	76.06%
strongly agree	85	23.94%	100.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>355</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	

The findings suggest that making a good impression is of high importance for CouchSurfers. 76% either agree or strongly agree that the presentation of self is part of their CouchSurfing experience. Simultaneously, 70% agree or strongly agree that they can reveal their true identity in CouchSurfing. A Spearman coefficient of 0.18 also suggests a positive association between the two variables. Those who attach importance to the presentation of self also feel that they can reveal their true selves in the community. Since

a certain presentation of self (a cosmopolitan one) is encouraged by the platform, the effect is the establishment of a community of true cosmopolitans. Further evidence for this finding is provided by splitting the analysis by the core-periphery dummy. The association between the two variables is stronger for people who are involved in the community (Spearman: 0.26, Sig.: 0.00) while it is non-existent for those who are not (Spearman: 0.02, Sig.: 0.80). People take on different roles in their lives and they either play them sincerely or cynically. However, presentation of self is as crucial for the sincere actor as it is for the cynical because it can control the impressions that others get. Those who know the rules of the game and play it right have fuller and richer experiences of their roles, are treated with more respect and earn more appreciation (Goffman, 1984). People who do not share the cosmopolitan values of the community (as facilitated by the platform) to begin with are left with three strategies. They can either try to disclose their true identity (which is more difficult the more interaction with other members of the community is sought), adapt it, or they can opt out. As the empirical findings suggest, the first strategy is of minor importance and only the latter two require further investigation (see section 6.2.2).

### **6.1.2 Access Barriers**

The commonly shared, cosmopolitan values can thus be seen as an access barrier to the community. They present informal mechanisms of exclusion which may make it hard for outsiders to enter the core of the community where exchange (of social, cultural, and economic capital) happens more frequently and relationships are more encumberable. Formal access barriers are virtually (no pun intended) non-existent. Everyone with internet access and basic ICT skills can create a profile and start hosting, surfing, or participating otherwise. The only requirement is registration (free of charge) and the provision of a few pieces of mandatory information. This grants the user access to the network but not necessarily to the community as well. Badges, references, friends, personalized requests, a complete profile, and the display of an identity that is in line with cosmopolitan values are sufficient, though not necessary conditions for being accepted in the community. A shortcoming in one part of the profile may not compromise the endeavor of communal participation but a fitting overall picture can significantly increase chances of acceptance.

### **6.1.3 Modes of Interaction**

The community offers a wide range of options for participation online as well as offline, most of which are self-governing with only the electronic infrastructure being provided on the platform. The *CouchRequest* is the standard way to initiate a real life encounter via CouchSurfing. It has a standard form which includes arrival and departure dates as well as the number of people who want to surf and the mode of transportation that will be used. Additionally, two sections for open text input are included where surfers should

introduce themselves and explain about their travel plans as well as write about why they prefer this specific host for their stay. There is also an option to publicly display the self-introduction so that other possible hosts may take notice. The second way of getting in touch with other CouchSurfers is through a messaging system. It works like a regular e-mail with the exception that it is tied to the profile and not to an e-mail address. Accordingly, the messages can only reach people who also have a CouchSurfing profile. These systems are a standard feature of most contemporary SNSs. The platform also contains a vast variety of discussion groups. Once again, only the infrastructure is provided and topics are chosen freely by the members. Anyone can create a group for whichever purpose or join an existing one. Much of the online-only interaction happens here although the largest numbers of membership are found in groups regarding locations. These groups are used to give and receive travel advice, information on local happenings and often include a section for emergency CouchRequests and -contact as well. Furthermore, members can also create polls to vote on arbitrary subjects within the groups. The fourth and last mode of interaction is provided by the “Activities” section. Here, members can create their own events or join activities created by others. Much like small advertisements or fliers, they contain information on the time and place of the event, a title, and a description. It is also possible to upload a photo, group events into categories and share them on Facebook. To increase usability, a Google Maps gadget is included which enables participants to locate and find direction to events easily.

The technical structure empowers individuals with new possibilities to connect. Semi-standard procedures increase usability while allowing for individual agency. This way, particularized, local, collective action can be organized more efficiently, an effect that social movements have taken advantage of as well. The difference is that the empowerment in CouchSurfing is used for coordinating leisure activities, cultural exploration, and interpersonal connection rather than political action<sup>3</sup>.

## 6.2 Cosmopolitanism

The goals of the CouchSurfing network are clearly stated and resemble cosmopolitan values of world citizenship. The technical structure is also designed to facilitate connection and cultural learning. However, the reality of CouchSurfing is more complex and as a network with open access and voluntary participation it may just be used to reduce traveling costs. Nonetheless, the analysis shows that CouchSurfers are quite passionate about the project. They are aware of the cosmopolitan ideals as 79% of them have read the “About CouchSurfing” section on the platform and most of them also regard themselves cosmopolitans. 54% rank identification with ‘All Humans’ as their highest and only 18% as their lowest priority.

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<sup>3</sup>For example, event categories include “Party”, “Sports”, “Teaching & Learning”, and “Hang Out” but not rallies, demonstrations, or any other kind of political activism

Table 6.3: Cosmopolitanism

Identification with 'All Humans'			
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cum. Percent</b>
Rank 1	191	53.95%	53.95%
Rank 2	64	18.08%	72.03%
Rank 3	35	9.89%	81.92%
Rank 4	64	18.08%	100.00%
Total	354	100.00%	

Table 6.4: Idealism

In this selfish world, CouchSurfing is a rare haven of humanity			
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cum. Percent</b>
strongly disagree	10	2.81%	2.81%
disagree	27	7.58%	10.39%
neither agree nor disagree	80	22.47%	32.87%
agree	156	43.82%	76.69%
strongly agree	83	23.31%	100.00%
Total	356	100.00%	

Table 6.5: Importance of Free Accommodation

The most important aspect of CouchSurfing is free accommodation			
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cum. Percent</b>
strongly disagree	93	25.27%	25.27%
disagree	142	38.59%	63.86%
neither agree nor disagree	67	18.21%	82.07%
agree	47	12.77%	94.84%
strongly agree	19	5.16%	100.00%
Total	368	100.00%	

Furthermore, CouchSurfing is regarded as a humane institution by the members. 67% either agree or strongly agree that it is a 'haven of humanity'. The idea of serving humanity and helping others regardless of origin is at the center of the cosmopolitan identity and



the findings suggest that this is also part of the self-understanding of most CouchSurfers. This is also reflected by the attitude towards the aspect of free accommodation. While 55% of the members who have stayed with other CouchSurfers agree or strongly agree that they would not use it if it was not free, 62% of them disagree or strongly disagree that it is the most important aspect (64% if those who have not surfed are taken into account as well). Additionally, only 22% of surfers agree or strongly agree that they could not afford traveling without CouchSurfing.

Table 6.6: Affordable Travel

	Without CouchSurfing I could not afford traveling		
	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
strongly disagree	59	20.21%	20.21%
disagree	109	37.33%	57.53%
neither agree nor disagree	59	20.21%	77.74%
agree	49	16.78%	94.52%
strongly agree	16	5.48%	100.00%
Total	292	100.00%	

The rule that accommodation has to be offered free of charge ensures the absence of economic interests. The motivation for hosting as well as for surfing is the desire to learn about different cultures, which enables people to better navigate and respect cultural differences, rather than making or saving money. Accordingly, a vast majority confirms that they have learned more about different cultures than they could have otherwise (83% agree or strongly agree). Another powerful indicator for the importance of cultural learning is that 54% of hosts agree or strongly agree that they prefer hosting people from other countries than their own.

Table 6.7: Cultural Learning

	My Couchsurfing experiences have taught me more about other cultures than I could have learned otherwise		
	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
strongly disagree	5	1.42%	1.42%
disagree	15	4.26%	5.68%
neither agree nor disagree	41	11.65%	17.33%
agree	127	36.08%	53.41%
strongly agree	164	46.59%	100.00%
Total	352	100.00%	

Learning and cultural exchange are not the only dimensions of cosmopolitanism. The goal of the cosmopolitan is to be a responsible citizen of the world. As such, it is his duty to become active and serve humanity as a whole. In the contemporary world, global problems like global warming, violation of human rights or rising inequalities due to the capitalist mode of production resulting in hunger and poverty figure prominently for cosmopolitan intervention. Petitioning governments and institutions, staging protests, and participating in NGOs are the main ways of voicing discontent and influencing policies. The majority of CouchSurfers participates in these kinds of political activism as 67% engage in at least one of them. 27% are members of an NGO, 39% have taken part in demonstrations and 51% have signed petitions in the last half year before the survey. Surprisingly, the data offer no clear evidence of a relationship between cosmopolitan identification and political activism. While there are differences in political activism between those who identify more or less with ‘All Humans’, the pattern is not as clear and the relationship not as strong as expected. Suitable correlation coefficients yield no significant results. However, the interpretation that this is a statistical artifact suggests itself for two reasons: a) variance, especially for cosmopolitan identification is rather low and b) differences may appear smaller due to the low number of categories for both variables. Further, more detailed research is needed to adequately grasp the relationship between cosmopolitanism and political activism in CouchSurfing.

Table 6.8: Political Activism by Cosmopolitan Identification

Political Activism	Identification with 'All Humans'				Total
	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Rank 4	
No	31.58%	22.22%	31.43%	41.27%	31.62%
Yes	68.42%	77.78%	68.57%	58.73%	68.36%
<b>Total</b>	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Another aspect much debated in cosmopolitan theorizing is the issue of nation states and the role they play for people’s identities in the form of patriotism. The Cynics were among the harshest critics of patriotism and the Stoic vision of a universal state does not leave much room for local affiliations either. Today, international workers’ movements and left-wing idealists and intellectuals regard patriotism as counter-revolutionary because it gets in the way of international brotherhood. On the other hand, many contemporary advocates of cosmopolitanism like Martha Nussbaum, David Held, and Jürgen Habermas follow the Kantian tradition, which permits patriotism and sees cosmopolitanism as achievable with and through nation states. As long as otherness is treated with respect and not hostility, patriotism is a legitimate way to honor one’s ancestry and does not stand in opposition to cosmopolitan humanism. The ambiguity surrounding the debate on patriotism is evident among CouchSurfers as well. Explicit rejection of patriotism is

rare as only 20% disagree or strongly disagree that they are proud of their nationality while 49% agree or strongly agree. However, those who rate themselves more patriotic attach significantly less importance to humanity as a whole (Spearman: -0.18, Sig.: 0.00). The lesson to be learned from these findings is that although non-patriots show a higher attachment to ‘All Humans’, patriotism and cosmopolitanism are not exclusive categories. Since CouchSurfers are a highly selective group (e.g. young, highly educated, and from a Western background) it remains open for debate if the same can be said for other parts of society as well.

Table 6.9: Patriotism

	I am proud of my nationality		
	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
strongly disagree	32	8.89%	8.89%
disagree	41	11.39%	20.28%
neither agree nor disagree	109	30.28%	50.56%
agree	90	25.00%	75.56%
strongly agree	88	24.44%	100.00%
Total	360	100.00%	

### 6.2.1 Partial Openness

Serving humanity as a whole is too big of a task to be fulfilled by an individual. It is simply not possible to help everyone equally. Help has to be directed towards specific people or groups and acts of solidarity happen within personal networks. Communities figure most prominently for directing solidarity, but community is also a construction of an ingroup against an outgroup, which imposes a logic of social closure (Nelson, 2006). Globalism and universalism are directed towards openness by including everyone. This is why the expression “global community” is an oxymoron. It combines contradictory notions of social openness and closure. In practice, this conflict is less problematic than it might seem but it is necessary to investigate how it is resolved and which aspect (community or openness) is stressed. In the continuum, complete openness would mean that any type of behavior is tolerated and nobody is to be excluded, effectively rendering solidarity impossible. When everyone is equal in every way, there is no telling who should profit from solidarity. Complete closure on the other hand can take full advantage of solidarity whilst limiting the scope of action to a small, culturally homogeneous group. This can also be true for groups who claim open-mindedness for themselves. Just as individuality can be a matter of cultural homogeneity, so can open-mindedness when people who are seen as narrow-minded are looked down upon. Traces of this can be found in the overenthusiasm for open-mindedness on part of members of the backpacking culture and in CouchSurfing

as well. The term open-minded does not live up to its reputation if the open-minded person is not willing to accept or even understand people who are not open-minded or non-cosmopolitan. CouchSurfing sets out to incorporate both openness and community which results in a structure of *partial openness*. New members trying to engage with other CouchSurfers are largely accepted and welcomed, but only some take part in communal activities.

Table 6.10: Rejection of Newcomers (hosts)

	I only host people who have lots of references		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cum. Percent</b>
strongly disagree	41	14.14%	14.14%
disagree	124	42.76%	56.90%
neither agree nor disagree	70	24.14%	81.03%
agree	46	15.86%	96.90%
strongly agree	9	3.10%	100.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	

Table 6.11: Meeting Attendance

	How often do you attend meetings or gatherings organized by the CouchSurfing community		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cum. Percent</b>
Never	84	22.64%	22.64%
Less than once a year	33	8.89%	31.54%
Once a year	40	10.78%	42.32%
Every half year	34	9.16%	51.48%
Every three months	71	19.14%	70.62%
Every month	39	10.51%	81.13%
More often	70	18.87%	100.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>371</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

The empirical findings support this hypothesis. 57% of CouchSurfers who have hosted others disagree or strongly disagree that they only host people who have lots of references and 50% of surfers state the same for their surfing choices. At the same time, rates of communal participation are high. Only 23% have never attended a CouchSurfing meeting or gathering and 29% do so on a regular basis of once a month or more often. Not surprisingly, the findings also indicate that those at the core of the community are more active in hosting and surfing. They have a mean number of 49 experiences (Median: 21),

while those who are at the periphery have only surfed and/or hosted 16 times on average (Median: 9). In a closed-off community, one would expect that those at the core would be more reluctant to host or surf with newcomers. However, no significant differences could be identified and there is even a slight tendency for core members to disagree more on the rejection of newcomers. The question then remains as to why openness does not pose a threat to the community. How are social openness and closure combined and integrated? The answer to this question lies in the structure of the network and the lack of anonymity which disciplines everyone who enters to behave in a certain way. If people can be held accountable for their actions, they discipline themselves to behave in accordance with the shared norms and values of the community. Violations can be sanctioned in different ways. Profiles can be reported to administrators if they contain dating spam, commercial spam or if they refer to a fake identity. In case a crime is committed, CouchSurfing offers a guideline on appropriate behavior which includes contacting local authorities (police, embassy, lawyer, hospital) as a first step. The third way to sanction inappropriate behavior is to leave a negative reference on the profile. While the first two deal with serious incidents and violations of explicit rules and laws, the reference is a soft mode of governance which induces homogeneity. The decentralized structure leaves room for local variations but the main, cosmopolitan principles are present throughout the whole network.

## 6.2.2 Selection and Learning

Since cosmopolitanism has a universalistic approach and strives to include the whole of humanity, it is necessary to address the potential of CouchSurfing to bring about social change towards a cosmopolitan world society. Social change is complex, especially on a global scale, and many factors on political, economic, and cultural levels contribute to it. Deducing the effect of a single phenomenon is a difficult task and measuring its impact in comparison to other phenomena is virtually impossible. However, CouchSurfing operates on a global level and the transformation of society is a fundamental goal. As demonstrated, large parts of the member base are thoroughly cosmopolitan in their attitudes and values but it remains unclear if this is a matter of self-selection or learning (or both). Furthermore, the question needs to be addressed if the effects occur prior to joining the network or in the course of the interaction with other CouchSurfers.

The data show that those who have had more CouchSurfing experiences also rank themselves higher on cosmopolitan identification. Of those who have neither hosted nor surfed, only 32% rank identification with 'All Humans' as their highest priority while 56% of those who have had at least one CouchSurfing experience do so. The differences are still noticeable even if rank one and two are combined (55% vs. 73%). The case numbers for CouchSurfers with no experience are low (N = 28) which raises questions of reliability for this analysis. However, even when comparing those with five or fewer experiences (N

= 95) to all the rest, the differences are still noticeable. 66% of them rank cosmopolitan identification as their highest or second highest priority while those with more than five experiences do so in 74% of the cases.

Table 6.12: Cosmopolitan Identification by Experience

Identification with 'All Humans'	CouchSurfing Experience		Total
	No	Yes	
<b>Rank 1</b>	32.14%	55.69%	53.82%
<b>Rank 2</b>	25.00%	17.54%	18.13%
<b>Rank 3</b>	14.29%	9.54%	9.92%
<b>Rank 4</b>	28.57%	17.23%	18.13%
<b>Total</b>	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Even though these differences can be identified, it is not clear if they can be attributed to a learning effect (new members are taught cosmopolitan values by the community or develop them naturally through the contact with other cultures) or self-selection (non-cosmopolitans do not get accepted or lose interest and opt out). The latter mechanism should prove to be more important because leaving the network is as simple as joining it. Interpersonal contacts as well as collected references that may represent exit barriers do not become relevant until interaction has intensified. Furthermore, the data in the sample as well as the official statistics indicate that CouchSurfing is highly selective in terms of social structure. Although access is virtually unrestricted, most CouchSurfers are young, highly educated, and from a Western, urban background with a high percentage (29%) being students. Additionally, no significant differences in these proportions can be identified when comparing experienced with non-experienced CouchSurfers<sup>4</sup>. This suggests that self-selection in terms of social structure happens mainly prior to joining the network. Thus, CouchSurfing is mostly appealing to a selective group in the first place with further exclusion mechanisms leaving a culturally homogeneous group of cosmopolitans who are in roughly the same life-situation to engage in prolonged activity.

However, conclusive remarks about the distinction between self-selection and learning effects can not be made on the basis of cross-sectional data. This would require a longitudinal analysis which is able to compare people's values and attitudes before they come into contact with CouchSurfing with those they develop once they have had experience with it. Furthermore, this does not necessarily stand in opposition to societal change because it often happens through particular groups who realize that they are in the same situation and demand to be taken seriously. Examples include the labor movement, feminism, and environmental activists. CouchSurfing creates a common ground, an identity framework, which creates meaning and guides action. In effect, this produces a cosmopolitan class

<sup>4</sup>The only exception is, that more experienced CouchSurfers are slightly older on average.

consciousness. This class consciousness shows some similarities but is different in key aspects from the class consciousness of frequent travelers that Calhoun (2002) describes and resembles, in many aspects, the kind of cosmopolitanism he advocates. To be precise, while CouchSurfers are highly educated and practice a transnational lifestyle, their value system does not culminate in a focus on abstract categorical equivalence and the rejection of national cultures as unsophisticated and backward. Furthermore, CouchSurfing does not take place in expensive hotels and business lounges, but in people's homes and specific, local cultural contexts, and also places a high value on community rather than individuality. Connection, tolerance, cultural learning, and solidarity are fundamental values of the network and they are reflected by the actions and attitudes of the members. Regardless of whether it is achieved through self-selection or a learning process, CouchSurfing has effectively established a cosmopolitan member base of more than four million people in eight years which is still growing rapidly (800.000 new members in the last year). This is a sign that the Internet and Web 2.0 technology, if used correctly, can be a powerful tool to advance civil society and further the cosmopolitan dream by providing cosmopolitans with means to find like-minded people and act out solidarity towards them. The latter aspect is the object of reflection in the following section.

### **6.3 Community and Encumbrance Capacity**

*A multitude is strong while it holds together, but so soon as each of those who compose it begins to think of his own private danger, it becomes weak and contemptible* – Niccolò Machiavelli

Communities are important for individuals; they shape identities, guide action, and organize the ways in which solidarity is being distributed. Much of people's social life revolves around communities of different sorts (religion, sports, families, professions, etc.). The contemporary world, especially in the West, is marked by a model of freedom and individuality and traditional communities seem to be eroding; e.g. the deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2004). The structures in which individuals are embedded are less rigid and people have a greater deal of choice as to which communities they want to belong. However, as embeddedness also creates security, the question remains if this development leads to a loss or liberalization of community, where members care and provide for each other. The Internet holds a special significance in this debate as interactions are 'virtual' and connections, supposedly, weaker than in the offline world. Online communities are framed as being networks rather than actual communities and therefore less able to establish solidarity among their members. The notion of encumbrance capacity of social relationships can make this difference scientifically comprehensible and clarify how far reaching the consequences of 'real virtuality' actually are.

The Internet has created a vast variety of possibilities to communicate, connect, share,

exchange, or otherwise interact. However, certain conditions have to be met in order for a service to be eligible for community formation and even in what has come to be known as ‘social networking’ there are profound differences in sociability. Preece (2000) stresses the importance of clearly stated goals so that people with similar goals are attracted and a stable community with little hostility can be established. She also points out that registration is crucial to support reciprocity and trust. Registering with a website is a sign of commitment and willingness to accept consequences for one’s actions. Otherwise, contact will be ephemeral as people can hop from community to community. Furthermore, people within the community must be able to clearly identify one another. If messages, comments, or other communication and actions can not be traced back to particular members, they do not have to take responsibility for what they say and do. Another mechanism that strengthens the community is tracking past behavior so that people can discriminate between those members who behave cooperatively and those who do not. Building up a reputation through past behavior creates an expectation that future interactions will also be positive. If reputation is visualized and can be connected to a specific member (e.g. if it is displayed in a profile), it enhances trust. It can also be helpful if acceptable behavior is defined and monitored. Additionally, online communities that encourage offline participation as well have been found to be stronger than those who do not (Haythornthwaite and Kendall, 2010). Social embeddedness and trust are higher and the problem of free-riding is less severe. Lastly, a central concern for communities and communal relationships is their distinction from associative relationships. Associative relationships are rationally motivated and rest on a mutual agreement of common practice. They follow either a logic of value-rational belief in one’s obligation or a rationale of benefit relying on the assumption that the other party will fulfill its end of the bargain. Communal relationships are based on a mutual sense of belonging together. Either through affection or tradition, people feel a common bond between each other. Examples of the former include market exchange, voluntary associations based on self-interest, or voluntary association based on absolute values (like hospitality or norms of reciprocity). The latter can be observed in erotic relationships, religious groups, relations of personal loyalty, or honor codes of military units (Weber, 1978). The motivations to participate in CouchSurfing can also be grouped into Weber’s four types of social action<sup>5</sup>.

1. The value-rational belief in the cosmopolitan obligation to provide hospitality
2. The rational exchange of accommodation
3. Respect for experienced members
4. A feeling of connection with other CouchSurfers

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<sup>5</sup>Weber’s typology of social action differentiates between value-rational, instrumentally rational, traditional, and affectual action (Weber, 1978, p. 24f).



Online interaction in social networks offers unique possibilities to establish affectionate relationships. In the real world, people meet and by gradually getting to know each other they develop affection or animosity. In online relationships, this process is reversed and people can get to know each other through their profiles and decide who they want to meet based on that information. Thus, online communities do have communal potential that may even be superior to offline mechanisms in some aspects; the downside being an incomplete representation of habitus with the absence of physical cues like gesture and facial expression. More importantly however, Weber's distinction has another important dimension. Associative relationships are utilitarian and therefore based on mutual benefit while communal relationships require a subjectively felt sense of a common bond which resembles the Aristotelian notion of the other self. Therefore, communal relationships are far more encumberable than associative relationships. Additionally, this shows that the analysis of the encumbrance capacity of social relationships in a given collective can be used as a reliable marker for its eligibility as a community. It also implies that if self-interest is to enter a community, it can be potentially harmful to the sense of connection. Relationships with other members are then seen as means to an end rather than an end in itself. In order for a collective not to appear cynical when calling itself a community, it must find ways to counter these tendencies if they exist. To clarify a possibly misleading point, the notions of communal and associative relationships are to be seen as ideal types. They are the two extremes of a continuum in which actually existing relationships are to be placed.

CouchSurfing meets all the criteria for a successful online community. It has clearly stated goals and guidelines for acceptable behavior, requires registration, supports the disclosure of personal information, keeps track of past behavior through references, and encourages offline contact between the members. Furthermore, the value system also includes an explicit absence of economic interests and charging surfers for accommodation is strictly forbidden. Yet, the question remains if the relationships in CouchSurfing can provide solidarity, i.e. if they are encumberable. A first indicator for the encumbrance capacity is the return rate on the survey. Social scientific research and surveying in general is dealing with a problem of declining return rates. People are getting more cautious and reluctant to participate in surveys because of their inflationary use not only in scientific research but also in marketing or as subterfuge to sell magazines or other products. Therefore, it was surprising that 371 completed questionnaires could be generated in just over two months. Those who were contacted personally through messages even yielded a return rate of  $\sim 95\%$  and  $\sim 40\%$  of them took the time to respond to the message to wish me good luck with my research, request updates on the progress, or offer further support.

### 6.3.1 Friendship

An easy, though entirely subjective way to measure the encumbrance capacity of social relationships is through questions regarding the degree of friendship. Friends and family represent the relationships with the highest degree of encumbrance capacity and if CouchSurfing can help establish them, it creates a stronger bond with the community as well. The survey included a range of questions dealing with friendship and the quality of relationships in CouchSurfing. The ones that measure the strongest kinds of relationships were posed as statements that could be checked if they apply. 19% stated that they met their closest friend through CouchSurfing and 21% said they met their partner (current or previous) there. Taken together, 32% of all CouchSurfers have established at least one highly encumberable relationship. Due to the verification bias, the true value should be slightly lower but even of those who are not verified, 28% have met their closest friend or partner through CouchSurfing.

The median number of friends a CouchSurfer has on the network amounts to 17 people. However, establishing contact is much easier in an online network than it is in the real world. Some users are tempted to collect as many contacts as possible although they have no actual relationship with them. This approach waters down their own circle of friends without a gain in reputation. On the contrary, it weakens the message and purpose of the community (Ebersbach et al., 2010). To address this problem, CouchSurfers were asked to give an estimate of the enduring contacts they had established through the network and also how many of these contacts they would actually call friends. The median number of enduring contacts is 8 (Mean value: 17.76) and only 7% state that they do not have any enduring contact with other CouchSurfers. On average, 57% of enduring contacts are regarded as friends. These findings show that the friends list is a poor indicator for real friendship but nevertheless, encumberable relationships are being established through the network. Whereas Facebook is said to only visualize a person's network and not (or at least only seldom) create new friendships (Görig, 2011), CouchSurfing accomplishes both.

Table 6.13: Superficial Contact

The contact with couchsurfers is usually rather superficial			
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cum. Percent</b>
strongly disagree	32	9.20%	9.20%
disagree	141	40.52%	49.71%
neither agree nor disagree	112	32.18%	81.90%
agree	52	14.94%	96.84%
strongly agree	11	3.16%	100.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	

Table 6.14: Personal Problems

With couchsurfers I can talk about personal problems			
	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
strongly disagree	16	4.55%	4.55%
disagree	67	19.03%	23.58%
neither agree nor disagree	150	42.61%	66.19%
agree	103	29.26%	95.45%
strongly agree	16	4.55%	100.00%
Total	352	100.00%	

Another reason why it is feasible to claim that the contacts in CouchSurfing matter to the members is the depth of connection measured here by the absence or prevalence of superficiality. Only 18% agree or strongly agree that their contact with CouchSurfers is usually rather superficial. Furthermore, only 24% disagree or strongly disagree that they can talk about personal problems with other members. Taking all these findings together, a picture emerges which asserts the prevalence of friendly and therefore encumberable relationships in CouchSurfing. It does not connect people for the purpose of cheap travel nor solely for the instrumental goal of cultural learning. Solidarity and friendship are fundamental elements as well.

### 6.3.2 Involvement and Transfer of Resources

Encumbrance capacity in its original sense denotes the goods and services that can be activated in a given relationship and is initially independent from notions of community. The justified assumption that communal relationships have a higher encumbrance capacity than associative relationships is derived from the theoretical discussion. However, the hypothesis must withstand empirical testing and a general analysis of resource transfer is needed to draw conclusions about the encumbrance capacity of social relationships in CouchSurfing.

Donations are a good indicator for high encumbrance capacity because they are voluntary acts of solidarity from which no return can be expected. Official statistics show that 7.8% of the users are ‘verified’ and have therefore made a donation to the network. This number seems low but it is not surprising as verification is the only standardized way to contribute to the network and it is not particularly advertised. Nevertheless, the donation/verification variable can be used to identify potential group differences in encumbrance capacity. In this case, the overrepresentation of verified users in the sample is more of a blessing than a curse as it creates higher variance and therefore more reliable results. The comparison of donation affinity by involvement shows that those who are

involved with the community also donate more often. Whereas those who do not participate in meetings and/or do not have a special status have a donation rate of only 27%, involved people have donated in 44% of the cases.

Table 6.15: Donations by Involvement

Donations	Community Involvement		Total
	No	Yes	
<b>No</b>	72.85%	56.48%	63.22%
<b>Yes</b>	27.15%	43.52%	36.78%
<b>Total</b>	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Support can also be shown through volunteer work which can include IT services, local, administrative tasks, or event management. This way, most of the processes in CouchSurfing are community-based and self-governing. Small and even big events are organized, discussion groups are monitored, or emergency accommodation provided. One of the biggest CouchSurfing events in Europe, the “Vienna Calling” festival, is hosted annually by volunteers without commercial interests and had an attendance of over 600 people in 2012. The time and energy that is devoted to the community in these ways provides evidence for the encumbrance capacity of social relationships in CouchSurfing.

Encumbrance capacity towards the network is one aspect but interpersonal encumbrance capacity is also a concern. A community can only ensure long term commitment if the members are willing to provide for each other in bilateral relations as well. To get a grasp of the interpersonal solidarity in CouchSurfing, members were asked how often they provided and were provided with access to social and cultural capital of their hosts or surfers. The results indicate a high encumbrance capacity especially for hosts. 53% of them state that they go sightseeing with their surfers very often or every time. 74% also give information about local attractions very often or every time they host CouchSurfers. Furthermore, 42% introduce surfers to their friends, and 35% engage in customs or traditions from their cultural background very often or every time. The same can be said in terms of shared cooking in 51% and of going out for drinks or partying in 43% of the cases. Only sportive activities have a lower rate of engagement with 43% of hosts never having played sports with their surfers. To provide a number that makes the overall proportions a bit more comprehensible, 58% of all people who have hosted others marked at least three out of the seven items on sharing cultural and social capital as either applying very often or every time. Rates of involvement are high as 59% either participate in meetings and gatherings or have a special volunteer status (or both). Encumbrance capacity is also high on an interpersonal level as well as towards the network. Volunteers keep the community going and provide services as needed.

### 6.3.3 Trust

Trust is a human way of handling the complexities and risks of modern society (Luhmann, 1989). It is the prerequisite of any encumberable relationship and it is “the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of the members of the community” (Preece, 2000, p. 191f). Thus, any analysis of communities and/or the encumbrance capacity of social relationships can profit from including indicators of trust as well. In the context of CouchSurfing it is particularly important because the network “relies upon trust as the core of its existence, given the immense amount of trust needed to admit a stranger to one’s home or to enter into a foreign territory” (Tan, 2010, p. 368).

Table 6.16: Trust

I generally trust CouchSurfing members			
	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
strongly disagree	0	0.00%	0.00%
disagree	9	2.47%	2.47%
neither agree nor disagree	43	11.78%	14.25%
agree	229	62.74%	76.99%
strongly agree	84	23.01%	100.00%
Total	365	100.00%	

The data suggest that trust is high among CouchSurfing members. 86% agree or strongly agree that they trust others in CouchSurfing. This can be seen as evidence for the effectiveness of the technological methods which increase trust (requiring registration, encouraging disclosure of personal information, references, etc.). During my research I also noticed that roughly 80% of the members used their real names as profile names although there is no rule that requires them to do so. Whereas Facebook users frequently violate the directive to give their real names, CouchSurfers do so voluntarily. CouchSurfing uses (among other methods) a reputation system for the generation of trust. Surfers and hosts may leave positive, neutral or negative references on other people’s profiles accompanied by an explanatory text. The most prominent example of this kind of online-reputation mechanism is eBay which was also one of the first companies to integrate it into their structure. Studies have shown that reputation systems are effective in signaling trustworthiness even in spite of tendencies to reciprocate and retaliate in bilateral assessment (i.e. people who receive negative references also give negative references in return and vice versa) (Resnick and Zeckhauser, 2002; Jøsang, 2007). It is only a seemingly objective measure but as long as people believe that poor behavior yields negative feedback it is effective in inducing good behavior. Since everyone can see the references left on the profile, people will likely

self-regulate their behavior to conform to CouchSurfing ideals<sup>6</sup>.

When connecting individuals, especially in an open-to-everyone environment, trust plays an essential role. Since the contacts usually start online, there is a considerable amount of insecurity about the characteristics of hosts and surfers. Theft, scams and even rape are phenomena that have occurred in a CouchSurfing context according to reports by members. These are breaches of trust which do not only hurt the victims but can also hurt the community as a whole. From a psychological perspective, trust is a “state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395). Thus, it is a sign of trust if members feel safe despite reports that suggest otherwise in some instances. This is true for the majority of CouchSurfers as 79% agree or strongly agree that they feel safe in other CouchSurfers homes.

Table 6.17: Feeling of Safety

	When I'm staying with CouchSurfers I feel safe		
	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
strongly disagree	1	0.34%	0.34%
disagree	4	1.36%	1.69%
neither agree nor disagree	56	18.98%	20.68%
agree	193	65.42%	86.10%
strongly agree	41	13.90%	100.00%
Total	295	100.00%	

Community formation relies heavily on trust which is particularly important in online environments where the true identity of a person can not be determined as easily since physical cues are missing. It is even more important if offline contact is to be facilitated as is the case in CouchSurfing. With its encouragement of truthful disclosure of personal information and other mechanisms that enable users to generate and display trustworthiness, CouchSurfing is able to make members feel safe and to trust other CouchSurfers to an extent that they allow ‘strangers’ to stay with them in their home and sometimes even provide spare keys, etc. With the effective management of trust, a critical requirement for encumberable relationships is met as well.

## 6.4 The Issue of Reciprocity

A proper community has to be able to provide for its members through acts of solidarity. Recent scientific research seems to focus on reciprocity as the main mechanism through

<sup>6</sup>For further information on the power of such structures in regulating behavior, see Foucault (1979).

which solidarity is accomplished and altruistic or pro-social behavior is modeled as an investment in future benefits and not as a means in itself. Advocates of reciprocity theory attribute pro-social behavior to *indirect* or *generalized* reciprocity<sup>7</sup> where the benefactor provides for the recipient because of the confident expectation that someone else will provide for him in the future (Seinen and Schram, 2006). Accordingly, communities are viewed merely as containers of generalized reciprocity (Yamagishi and Kiyonari, 2000). If human interaction is seen as ultimately amounting only to self-interest, it is not surprising that human cooperation presents a “challenge” and a “paradox” (Rockenbach and Milinski, 2006, p. 718). However, cooperative behavior even towards those who can not be expected to return the favor has always been part of the human condition as well and generalized reciprocity can not sufficiently explain prolonged altruism. Nejezchleba (2011) claims that reciprocity is the guiding principle of CouchSurfing but fails to adequately acknowledge the social dilemma of the partial openness approach because reciprocity alone can not explain why CouchSurfing works long term. Open access to a common good produces a free-rider problem because people who reciprocate must acknowledge that personal norms of reciprocity are variable and that not everyone will return favors to the same extent they have received them. If such behavior is anticipated, the rational actor realizes the risk of exploitation and ceases to participate in the production of the common good (in this case, available accommodation) altogether.

The viewpoint of encumberable relationships takes a different approach. It places friendship and affection at the heart of community interaction and reciprocity as a consequence. Reciprocity is a central concern for communities (Preece, 2000, p. 188) but rather than being at the core of why people engage in communal activity (the community as a container of generalized reciprocity) it is seen as a product of encumberable relationships. The predicted outcomes are similar in many ways but the notion of encumbrance capacity can explain altruistic behavior whereas the market-exchange paradigm, which guides much of the thinking in reciprocity research, cannot sufficiently do so. People in communities do not provide for each other because they expect something in return but because they feel an affection for the other person. Encumberable relationships foster pro-social behavior and alleviate possible problems of free-riding. In order for CouchSurfing to work under circumstances of partial openness, it needs a strong communal core made up of altruistic individuals who take joy in helping others. If the encumbrance capacity of their relationship with the network is too low, the endeavor is bound to fail.

To test for reciprocity norms empirically, the questionnaire included indicators for the *personal norm of reciprocity* (PNR) for all participants consisting of measures for *positive reciprocity* (rewarding positive action with another positive action) and *negative reciprocity* (punishing negative action with negative action). Two items referring to views on reciprocity specifically within CouchSurfing were also included.

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<sup>7</sup>The two terms are used synonymously.

Table 6.18: Reciprocity as Reason for Hosting

I feel obligated to offer my couch because I have surfed other people's couches			
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cum. Percent</b>
strongly disagree	36	14.52%	14.52%
disagree	91	36.69%	51.21%
neither agree nor disagree	57	22.98%	74.19%
agree	50	20.16%	94.35%
strongly agree	14	5.65%	100.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	

Table 6.19: Reciprocity Norm

Everyone who surfs other people's couches should also offer his/her own couch			
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cum. Percent</b>
strongly disagree	23	6.27%	6.27%
disagree	106	28.88%	35.15%
neither agree nor disagree	98	26.70%	61.85%
agree	100	27.25%	89.10%
strongly agree	40	10.90%	100.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	

The results indicate that reciprocity norms are not particularly important in CouchSurfing. Neither do hosts regard it as their duty to host as 51% of those hosts who have also surfed disagree or strongly disagree that they feel obligated to host. Nor does a majority of the general CouchSurfing population believe that it is necessary for everyone to participate equally in hosting and surfing. 35% explicitly disagree or strongly disagree that everyone who surfs should also host travelers. It is also important to note that this attitude is held almost equally by those who have done more surfing (38% disagree or strongly disagree) and those who have done more hosting (35% disagree or strongly disagree). Bigger differences are found by splitting the analysis by community involvement. Of the non-involved group, 30% disagree or strongly disagree with the reciprocity concept, while 39% of involved members do so. The findings point to the conclusion that reciprocity norms do not play a significant role in CouchSurfing and that they are even less important for those engaging in communal activities. It is the encumberable relationships at the core of the community which make the collective strong and which



ensure the long-term functioning of the CouchSurfing concept. Communal relationships do not depend on reciprocity because they are encumberable. Further evidence for this is provided by the actual surfing and hosting behavior. Those who are involved in the community have a mean relative hosting ratio of 0.1614 (mean absolute ratio = 26.93), while those who are not show a value of -0.0026 (mean absolute ratio = 1.79). This means that involved members host more often than non-involved members; in absolute terms as well as relative to the total number of CouchSurfing experiences. Furthermore, the analysis of positive and negative PNR reveals that the CouchSurfing population is predominately made up of pro-social individuals. Values for positive reciprocity are consistently high in all of the variables while negative reciprocity is negated.

The present study suggests that norms of reciprocity only play a minor role in the functioning of the CouchSurfing. Since the communal aspect is strong, transfer of resources is more a matter of solidarity. Every encounter is a chance to meet a potential friend so the distinction between hosting as cost and surfing as benefit is a construction which, in many cases, does not reflect reality. If CouchSurfing is viewed as a community it is less relevant who hosts and who surfs because the benefit comes for both parties as the other is seen as an actual or potential friend and the time spent together is a benefit in itself. The exchange of ideas and cultural learning is a bonus deriving from the focus on diversity and open-mindedness. A common meeting ground is necessary but it less important who provides it. Host do not offer accommodation out of reciprocity but solidarity. This requires identification with the community and a pro-social attitude. Evidence for the latter is provided by the analysis of norms of reciprocity as rates of positive reciprocity are high while rates of negative reciprocity are low. Within the CouchSurfing population, pro-social behavior differs most profoundly between the center and the periphery. People who are not involved in the community host less often. They identify with the network to a lesser extent, making their relationships with CouchSurfing less encumberable. What the analysis of reciprocity norms does reveal is that CouchSurfing is a collective of do-gooders<sup>8</sup>. The shared cosmopolitan identity supports pro-social behavior through the emphasis of humanism and the norm of hospitality.

## 6.5 Implications of Recent Changes

CouchSurfing encompasses both social openness and closure and ensures its effective functioning through the encumberable relationships of the community. Members who are passionate about the project are needed but the vision also includes that *everyone* can participate. Thus, there is a constant negotiation process between the associative and the communal aspect, the outcome of which defining the number and quality of the relationships. Changes in the structure can tilt the scale to one side or the other. In the

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<sup>8</sup>The term is meant to refer to well-intentioned idealists who support humanitarian causes, without implying the negative connotation it has come to carry.

course of writing up this thesis, CouchSurfing has undergone significant changes, the consequences of which are still to play out. In August 2011, CouchSurfing abandoned its non-profit approach (after being denied a proper non-profit status in the US) and became a B Corporation. This status allowed for the collection of investments rather than relying on donations and verification fees while maintaining a charitable image. Unlike regular corporations, a B Corporation has to meet social and environmental performance standards which are set and monitored by B Lab, a non-profit rating agency. Up to date, CouchSurfing has raised 15 million dollars in funding. The money has been used to rework the website design, develop a mobile app that increases usability of CouchSurfing on smartphones, and to offer integration with other SNSs and internet applications (Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Flickr, Youtube, Yelp). Especially the latter change is a sign of increased social openness in CouchSurfing. It encourages more people to join the network but since there is no additional mechanism to ensure self-selection of cosmopolitans this move may water down the community to a certain extent. The only step in the communal direction are the slightly tightened informal requirements of presentation of self. Whereas CouchRequests used to consist of an e-mail-like message, it now additionally requires surfers to explain why they would like to meet the specific host they have chosen, thus displaying their commitment to establish a “meaningful relationship”.

Especially among existing members, the rapid pace of new changes may create a feeling that they are imposed upon them from above or guided by the interests of investors making them more reluctant to participate and volunteer. The challenge for CouchSurfing officials is the successful presentation of the developments as beneficial for the community which is getting increasingly difficult. The conversion into a Benefit Corporation itself was not well received by many core members and some even left the network out of protest. The implementation of new Terms of Use (ToU) and a new Privacy Policy triggered the next wave of sign-offs and voicing of discontent especially in the European community. The terms grant CouchSurfing the right to “use, reproduce, display, perform, adapt, modify, create derivative works from, distribute, have distributed and promote [...] Member Content in any form, in all media now known or hereinafter created and for any purpose, including without limitation the right to use [a member’s] name, likeness, voice or identity.” Furthermore, they allow that the terms be changed “at any time and in [CouchSurfing’s] sole discretion” (CouchSurfing ToU, Sep. 21, 2012)<sup>9</sup>. To complete the picture, the new Privacy Policy, which reads more like an anti-privacy policy, now includes a section stating that member data can be used by CouchSurfing even after profiles are deleted by the users. To be correct, profiles can not actually be deleted but only deactivated. Critical passages limiting the transfer of information to third parties were not adopted from the old Privacy Policy and liability to inform members of changes were also left out. There is still a section on “Sharing of Information” which is meant to create a feeling of security about personal data but it includes a statement that allows

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<sup>9</sup>The most recent Terms of Use are available at: <http://www.couchsurfing.org/terms.html>.

information to be shared according to the ToU. Since the ToU grant “perpetual, worldwide, irrevocable, non-exclusive, royalty-free and fully sublicensable license” to user data, this presents a loophole which makes the privacy commitment seem cynical. Vrakas et al. (2010) identifies the protecting of user privacy as an essential element of trustworthiness in e-Government services. An e-Government service has three main characteristics: “a) it is electronic and not paper based, b) it is available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, and c) it facilitates the provision of information and delivery of services” (Vrakas et al., 2010, p. 299). Thus, CouchSurfing qualifies as an e-Government service and protection of privacy may prove to be important there as well. While the policies ensure a maximum of flexibility for CouchSurfing executives, they leave users stripped of rights to personality while encouraging complete and honest disclosure of information necessary for building up interpersonal trust before offline encounters with strangers. The old policies also granted CouchSurfing extensive control over user data but with outside, financial interests becoming an issue, the situation changed considerably.

*How is the community of CouchSurfing going to be compensated for the voluntary work, free advertisement and donations which has [sic] been put into the growth of the community but then taken away to be used for profit for the owners and investors instead of profit for the community which would have meant keeping the promised non-profit status? I perceive this as theft by the founders and as a betrayal of trust. - Former CouchSurfing member<sup>10</sup>*

Trust is a crucial requirement for encumberable, communal relationships. Normally, this does not pose a problem because “we usually do not think about much about trust unless our trust is broken” (Myskja, 2011, p. 128). The quote exemplifies the consequences when it does happen and how this can bring about a change in the perception of a relationship. The previously assumed we-ness is replaced by an us-vs-them dichotomy thus signifying the transformation from a communal to an associative relationship. It further emphasizes the connection between community and encumbrance capacity. The resources that were once happily given to the community now are being perceived as costs for which one needs to be compensated. Singular instances of broken trust can hardly be prevented and do not pose a threat to the community as a whole, however, systemic, large scale breach of trust like selling member data to investors or changing policies without members’ consent can mark the end of many encumberable relationships. It should also be noted that the breach of trust disproportionately affects those members who have put the most effort into building and maintaining the community. The fact that volunteers are increasingly being replaced by employees can be seen as a harbinger for the road ahead.

Social reality is too complex to make definite predictions of future developments but under the assumption that non-considered factors remain constant (this includes adjustment of

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<sup>10</sup>The quote is taken from a discussion board entry available at [http://www.couchsurfing.org/group\\_read.html?gid=45507&post=13175187](http://www.couchsurfing.org/group_read.html?gid=45507&post=13175187).

behavior due to the insights gained from sociological reflection of the issues itself), general trends can be mapped out. The general trend for CouchSurfing seems to be commercialization. The platform is gaining users but the sense of community and belonging may slowly be breaking away. The new direction of the platform will hurt the communal aspect and CouchSurfing may lose its most compassionate members. To what extent this will happen depends on the CouchSurfing authorities and their ability to deal with the emerging challenges. It also depends on the community and their ability to a) reflect what is happening and b) mobilize resistance. Some members are very committed to keeping the communal aspect strong but the petition launched in Avaaz Community Petitions<sup>11</sup> only yielded a little more than 4000 signatures<sup>12</sup>. Strengthening the communal aspect does not necessarily mean that CouchSurfing must return to its non-profit approach but ways must be found to adequately communicate what changes are being made and why (transparency) and to give core members a feeling of participation (democracy). It has to be made sure that investors are working for the community and not the other way around. (Re-)Implementing protection of members' privacy would be a first step.

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<sup>11</sup>Avaaz is a network and web movement dedicated to fighting climate change, human and animal rights infringements, poverty, and corruption. It mostly relies on clicktivism through petitions to raise awareness and gather support for humanitarian causes. Community Petitions is a free-to-use, online petitioning tool where every member can start their own petition.

<sup>12</sup>The petition is available at [https://secure.avaaz.org/en/petition/For\\_a\\_strong\\_Community\\_behind\\_CouchSurfing/](https://secure.avaaz.org/en/petition/For_a_strong_Community_behind_CouchSurfing/).

## 7 Summary and Conclusion

*The law of world citizenship shall be limited to conditions of universal hospitality – Kant (Perpetual Peace)*

The future of CouchSurfing is yet undetermined. Passionate CouchSurfers may migrate to different hospitality networks, they may not care about the exploitation of their voluntary work for profit and carry on anyway, they may voice their discontent and organize resistance to a degree that can no longer be ignored or sweet-talked by CouchSurfing officials, or they might not realize what is happening at the top-level and the resulting consequences for the community altogether (possibly making the breach of trust all the more severe when they do). Whatever may be the case, the picture that can be drawn from the analysis of the current state of the platform presents it as successfully providing a cosmopolitan project identity. The cosmopolitan character reveals itself both in the stated purpose and also in practice. The goal of creating a global community, utopian and paradoxical as it may appear to social scientists, is a cosmopolitan ideal that members can identify themselves with. Although it may never be fully reached, the approach of facilitating exchange, connection, and cultural learning corresponds to what sociology would suggest as a model for cosmopolitan transformation of existing cultures. Appreciating diversity and recognizing the particular and partial solidarities of people in different historical and geographical contexts enables the cosmopolitan to navigate cultural differences and to mediate between those who have not reached the same level of reflection. The analysis has shown that cultural learning and exchange of ideas and skills play a significant role in CouchSurfing experiences. Furthermore, they are aware of the ideals of the network and most of them regard themselves as cosmopolitans with a primary allegiance to the whole of humanity. Many of them are very passionate about the project and see it as a ‘haven of humanity’. The idea of a single, unified, cosmopolitan state does not seem to be particularly prevalent among CouchSurfers as most of them, despite being politically active, are indifferent or show a positive attitude towards patriotism. Although CouchSurfers could be identified as predominately cosmopolitan, the question to what extent interactions with and within the network transform identities must largely remain unanswered from an empirical point of view as this would require a longitudinal design. Cross-sectional data can only pinpoint cosmopolitan attitudes at a given point in time and does not allow for an evaluation of change in attitudes. Self-selection of cosmopolitans is most probably the main mechanism that determines which people engage in

CouchSurfing but it is plausible to assume that authentic, cross-cultural traveling or hosting experiences cause a change in perception of the world as well. Selection mechanisms in terms of social structure exist by the virtue of the Digital Divide alone since inequality of access to the Internet also means inequality of access to CouchSurfing. Selection in terms of attitudes can also be identified since CouchSurfers are fairly homogeneous in this respect and importance of cosmopolitan identification is high even among newbies.

Ultimately, it is of minor importance if CouchSurfing can or cannot mold people into cosmopolitans because the transformation of society can also be achieved by uniting cosmopolitans as a ‘class for itself’. CouchSurfing does so by providing an identity framework and means for collaborative action. Belonging to the community of CouchSurfers creates meaning, reinforces and strengthens members’ pro-social and humanist character, and enables them to act out their ideals. To build up a community and support sociability, the platform uses Web 2.0 technology. With online profiles, members can present themselves to the enclosed public, display their level of commitment, and describe what they can contribute to the project. Profile badges may have gamifying effect and, combined with references, signal that a member can be trusted. Although references are an imperfect predictor of trustworthiness, their existence creates an “as if” situation in which both parties act as if they are trustworthy<sup>1</sup> because if they don’t, they risk negative comments to influence future interactions. Further elements supporting sociability are the different modes of interaction provided by the platform. Surfing and hosting are the main ways to get in touch with other CouchSurfers but contact can also be established via discussion boards, by creating and participating in events and activities, or by using the e-mail-like messaging system. The topics that are being discussed can be freely chosen by the members and events also depend on local preferences and participation. Most discussion groups about towns and cities include emergency contact information in case something goes wrong and local events often include regular meetings. These meetings can be seen as rituals that support identification with the network and establish social cohesion (for further information on rituals and community, see Merton, 1968, *Manifest and Latent Functions*). Lastly, the regulatorily enforced absence of economic interests in hosting and surfing also stresses the communal aspect.

However, since access to the network is virtually unrestricted (requiring only registration and provision of some mandatory information), global inclusion is stressed as a goal, and contributions are entirely voluntary, CouchSurfing can not be regarded as a typical community. Rather, the paradoxical notion of a “global community” creates a structure of partial openness with a core community of highly active and culturally homogeneous members and a periphery that shows lower rates of involvement and activity. To evaluate the effectiveness of community-supporting measures within the network and to be able to weigh them against instrumental exchange of resources (i.e. distinguishing between solidarity and reciprocity) I developed the concept of encumbrance capacity of social rela-

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<sup>1</sup>Further information about the “as if” character of virtual environments is provided in (Myskja, 2011).

tionships. It refers to the resources that are unidirectionally being activated to initiate or maintain a relationship and it can also be seen as a measure for the degree of friendship (in an Aristotelian sense). Taking the notion even further, it can also be operationalized as the amount of adversity a relationship can withstand before it is dissolved. It is not the jack of all trades and faces methodological challenges like its hypothetical character (when constructed as potential solidarity) but if it is developed further and established as a proper research paradigm, it can significantly add to our understanding of communities in an age of 'real virtuality'. In CouchSurfing, the indicators used provide evidence of encumberable relationships. Subjective evaluation of friendship shows that contacts are mostly non-superficial and that the majority of CouchSurfers have established enduring and meaningful relationships. 32% have even met their best friend or a partner on CouchSurfing. Analysis of the transfer of resources shows that members do more than just provide accommodation for each other. They go sightseeing, provide information about local attractions, engage in customs and traditions from their respective personal backgrounds, etc. It was also evident that hosts invest more time and resources than surfers. Nonetheless, a significant portion of CouchSurfers does more hosting than surfing and 11% even state that they have only hosted and not surfed at all. Although this is beginning to change, the fact that volunteers provide most of the IT services, e-mail support, event management and moderator functions reinforces the notion of highly encumberable relationships within and towards the network. CouchSurfing is not merely an exchange network but puts an emphasis on the interpersonal relationship between host and surfer and has a general approach of communal interaction. The findings suggest that it is precisely this approach, combined with Web 2.0 empowerment tools, that makes CouchSurfing work as well as it does and that explains why it is more popular than other services on the Internet designed to reduce travelling costs (e.g. carpooling or housesharing<sup>2</sup>).

As for broader societal implications, the analysis shows that global connectedness and the Internet are not agents of cosmopolitanism by themselves. Cosmopolitanism can not be deduced from the structural features of the contemporary world or from the medium Internet. It presents a challenge for the nation state, but less as a cosmopolitan counter concept and more as a new set of possibilities and as an environment with different rules and mechanisms. Nation states can set the boundaries in which CouchSurfing can operate with internet censorship or travel restrictions, but in countries with unrestricted internet access and easily obtainable visas, cosmopolitanism can be pursued by the respective communities. They can use the possibilities of the Internet and Web 2.0 technology for empowerment, making community formation more effective and functional. The rules of the game are different in online contexts and functional equivalents need to be found which can adequately substitute the mechanisms that people have developed in the 'real' world to figure out how to behave and who to trust. This is a process that takes time, but

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<sup>2</sup>Prominent examples of these include [www.carpooling.com](http://www.carpooling.com) and [www.homeexchange.com](http://www.homeexchange.com)

service providers are making quick progress. The findings indicate that CouchSurfing has a sophisticated approach to managing interactions, facilitating contacts, and establishing encumberable relationships. The community aspect ensures prolonged interaction in local affiliations while the network aspect promotes openness. Clearly stated goals, a wide range of possibilities to connect and participate, and an infrastructure that facilitates trust, friendliness, open-mindedness, and hospitality make CouchSurfing one of the most sophisticated and successful endeavors of cosmopolitan community formation today.



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