'SAY SOMETHING MEANINGFUL ABOUT YOURSELF': DISTINCT SELF-PRESENTATION ON COUCHSURFING

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Abstract

With the emergence of social media platforms, the phenomenon of self-presentation gained new setting in which it can be manifested, and that has attracted scholars from different fields. Scientists have largely applied Goffman's impression management theoretical framework in analysing different aspects of self-presentation on social media and research has mainly stayed within the realm of most popular social media sites, such as Facebook and Instagram. Self-presentation in Couchsurfing has not been in the focus of researchers, that is why this research investigates that phenomena with the application of Goffman's impression management theory. I have conducted qualitative content analysis and thematical analysis to investigate how Couchsurfing users present themselves on the platform. The research has found that users, when self-presenting in the profiles, disclose their personality by presenting meaningful information while also balancing the disclosure of private personal information; in the private performances of couch requests users prepare for the performance beforehand so they can reveal information that would be appealing and appropriate to the host. In both performances, audience is greatly considered.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

Social media is an umbrella term that gathers many concepts, including social networking sites. Van Dijck (2013) considers social networking sites a type of social media that foster interpersonal contact and establish various relationships. Carr & Hayes (2015) argue that "social media are Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content." (p.50). How social interaction is facilitated through social media differs from platform to platform. Most social media platforms demand users to present themselves (i.e. self-present) to connect to others: choosing a name/username, disclosing personal information or preferences, and usually uploading few personal photographs.

The concept of self-presentation is often used evenly to Goffman's impression management (1956), a sociological theory that equates social interactions to theatrical performances. In most cases, I will refer more to self-presentation and less to impression management, which is how Goffman named the theory in the mid-20th century. Scholars have found Goffman's theory immensely appropriate in social media research (Boyd, 2008; Hogan, 2010; Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; Hollenbaugh, 2021). Specifically, the research had been conducted on dating sites (Ellison et al., 2006; Ellison et al., 2012), Facebook (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016), Instagram (Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Jung et al., 2017), influencers (Audrezet, 2020), digital nomads (Willment, 2020) and other social media platforms and phenomena.

In face-to-face interactions, people tend to rely on their intuition when deciding to trust others. However, in the online setting, a lack of visual and verbal cues calls for careful consideration and changes in how one decides on others' trustworthiness (Rosen et al., 2011). That is especially important on Couchsurfing, a social media platform which fosters contact with strangers and where intimate practices happen (Miguel, 2011), making the self-presentation even more interesting than in other social media platforms.

Since its inception in 2004, Couchsurfing has gathered the most significant number of people who believe in exchanging non-material goods, primarily experiences, cultures, and friendships

(Miguel, 2018). The most prevalent definition of Couchsurfing is that of a hospitality exchange platform (Chen, 2018) that fosters the social interaction of strangers who would like to 'surf' in the homes of other users who 'host' or vice versa (Couchsurfing, 2022). One of the scholars that investigated Couchsurfing was Germann Molz (2013). She equalised the platform to a branch of 'moral economy', a type of alternative tourism that opposes streams of mass tourism. Belief in the 'right way of travel' was shaken in 2011 when Couchsurfing changed its legal status from a non-profit to a for-profit organisation, which attracted first louder critics of the platform (Mikołajewska-Zając, 2016). Regardless of the shift, Couchsurfing remained the biggest hospitality exchange platform that counts around 14 million registered users to date. However, many users are not active. Either because of the feeling of betrayal by the company's shift towards for-profit waters or because of the paywall created because of the "challenging realities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic", as it stands in Couchsurfing's notification. Most similar platform to Couchsurfing, BeWelcome has around 200 thousand users (BeWelcome statistics, 2022).

Research on Couchsurfing has attracted scholars from different areas (Molz, 2013; Lampinen, 2016; Belk & Khan, 2020). Studies have investigated motivations behind the usage of Couchsurfing (Jung et al., 2016; Kuhzady et al., 2020), trust-building via reputation systems (Liu, 2012; Cherney et al., 2014; Roznhyn & Kuznetsova, 2015; Luo & Zhang, 2016; Mikołajewska-Zając, 2018; Costa, 2018), community building (Rosen et al., 2011) and intimate mobility (Bialski & Batorski, 2010; Liu, 2012; Molz, 2014). However, little research showed how Couchsurfing users tend to present themselves, with only few researchers touching on the topic but analysing something else (Miguel & Medina, 2011; Cherney et al., 2014; Chen, 2018).

This thesis aims to research how Couchsurfing users present themselves on the Couchsurfing social media platform. It investigated how Couchsurfing users appropriated the platform's features for their self-presentation (e.g., Profile sections such as the About me section, photographs, and couch request messages) and why they do it this way, exploring the front and backstage, as Goffman (1956) discussed. Users' profiles (About section and photographs) and couch requests are an online manifestation of the front stage performance (Papacharissi, 2010), in which the latter, I will consider the private front stage performance. Analysis of users' profiles, photographs, and couch requests aligns with the exploration of their front stage behaviour, and

semi-structured interviews serve as a basis for exploring the backstage, which, Goffman (1956) claims, is the territory in which actors prepare for the upcoming performance. Thus, the research paper aims to answer the following research question:

RQ: What characterises the self-presentation of Couchsurfing users?

The next chapter will cover the literature review. I will elaborate on Goffman's impression management theory, self-presentation in social media, and relevant research that touches on aspects of self-presentation in Couchsurfing. In the third chapter, I will explain the study's methodology, how the research was designed, the sample selected, and the data collected and analysed. Afterward, research results will be contextualized in the discussion and analysis chapter. The final chapter will provide the main conclusions, study limitations, future recommendations, and practical implications.

2.0. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The following chapter will cover different literature to discuss several concepts. First, it will introduce Goffman's impression management framework. Then, I will elaborate on the notion of self-presentation, a synonymous term for impression management, relying on research that investigated this phenomenon within social media. Finally, the last two sections will identify the gap in the literature.

2.2. Impression management

In his seminal book The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Erving Goffman (1956) developed an impression management theory that dramaturgically describes social interactions. He claimed that people, when interacting with others, try to control the impression they give. Goffman (1956) called it a performance or "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (p.13).

The performance happens in a specific bounded setup divided into front stage and backstage (Hogan, 2010). The audience's presence determines the front stage, and the absence of observers makes the backstage (Persson, 2012). The front stage is the intentional act performed in front of the audience, in which people tend to present idealised versions of themselves (e.g., flight attendants, receptionists, bartenders). The front comprises of setting (a physical background where the performance is done) and the personal front that includes appearance (shows the performer's social status) and manner (the interaction role performer will be expected to play). Appearance and manner can sometimes be in opposition (Tashmin, 2016). For instance, a person of a lower economic status spends money on unnecessary things because they want to impress the audience (family or friends). Likewise, during the performance, the actor's expression equipment is compounded by given (intentional expressions that can be controlled, e.g., verbal communication) and given off expressions (non-verbal means of communication, e.g., tone of voice, body language) (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019). As with appearance and manner, given and given off expressions can be in disproportionate relations. An individual can reject another person's request for dinner, saying they are not hungry, while

in the next moment, their stomach can make intestinal noises that do not align with the verbal message. On the other hand, when there is no audience for the performance, the ideal mask can be taken off, which is considered backstage (e.g., at home). It is said that the performer prepares in backstage for the next performance (Goffman, 1956).

Furthermore, actors implicitly ask their audience to consider the performance seriously, "they are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess" (Goffman, 1956, p.10). However, the performance for one type of audience will not be the same for the other because performers separate the audience. Goffman (1956) called this audience segregation because it serves as "a device for protecting fostered impression" (p.31). It can also happen that the performance witnessed by the audience is not truthful. Performers may want to fool the audience because of potential rewards and dirty work they want to hide (Goffman, 1956). The performer believes it is for the audience's good.

Hogan (2010) built on Goffman's (1956) impression management framework and modified it with his own theoretical and digitally more appropriate view. Hogan (Ibid) was interested in rejuvenating Goffman's model, so it is more appropriate in the world of social media. Indeed, he thought of social media platforms as exhibition sites. This approach helped him understand Goffman's situational assumptions bounded by space and time. An exhibition site, according to Hogan (2010), is "a site (typically online) where people submit reproducible artifacts (read: data)" (p.381).

The self-presentation theory has been applied in social media research to understand better users' behaviours and motivations (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019). As social media scholars believe that self-presentation is "an ever-evolving cycle through which individual identity is presented, compared, adjusted, or defended against a constellation of social, cultural, economic, or political realities" (Papacharissi, 2010, p.304), then looking for patterns that users rely on in self-presenting in a specific social media platform becomes a path worth exploring. The concept of self-presentation drew the attention of many social media scholars mainly because these platforms have introduced a new array of tools and features that people can utilise to present themselves (Devito et al., 2017).

2.3 Self-presentation on social media

When presenting themselves online, people resort to self-presentation techniques constrained not by space and time as in the real world but only by social media features. Such circumstances, as Boyd and Ellison (2007) argue, make social networking sites (i.e., social media platforms) "an important research context for scholars investigating processes of impression management, self-presentation, and friendship performance" (p. 10). By enabling users to create online identities through profiles and connecting to friends, social media platforms have offered users an extended platform for self-presentation and social connection. Social media platforms have replaced the physical background of the setting - "furniture, décor and physical layout" (Goffman, 1956, p. 13) - with multimedia tools, giving users more authority over the distance between front and backstage (Papacharissi, 2010). This makes self-presentation in a social media setting complex and intriguing phenomenon.

Indeed, scholars decided to investigate different aspects of self-presentation on different social media platforms. Scientists have focused on: self-presentation strategies on social media (Ellison et al., 2006; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; Jung et al., 2016), the accuracy of the self-presentation (Back et al., 2010; Chou & Edge, 2012), personality (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013), the role of an audience when presenting and consuming social media content (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016), self-disclosure (Aspling, 2011; Bacev-Gilev & Haji, 2017) and other topics.

Facebook has been an incredibly fertile ground for research on self-presentation (Mehdizadeh, 2010; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016). Bareket-Bojmel et al.'s (2016) research show that Facebook acts as a self-presentation tool. Users primarily relied on enhancing strategies while less on those of derogative nature. Interestingly, those who did publish derogative self-content still gained considerable social support in terms of likes and comments. Furthermore, Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) research found that college students apply impression management strategies when selecting which images to publish on Facebook and which photographs they will approve to be tagged in by others. Participants understood that all these images represent them in front of a diverse audience on Facebook,

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from their friends and partners to their work colleagues and family members. In the context of online dating platforms, Ellison et al. (2006) discovered that users seemed to highlight positive traits in their self-presentation and constantly employed creative strategies when posting photographs, deciding on whom to contact and when communicating with other users. Likewise, self-presentation social media research shows that although social media users create profiles that reflect their true selves (Back et al., 2010), they do this by stressing the positive side of their true selves (Chou & Edge, 2012; Vogel & Rose, 2016).

Personality-orientated self-presentation research shows interesting results as well. MySpace was discovered to be used to explore identity and show the idealised components of one's personality (Manago et al., 2008). Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky (2010) researched how personality relates to social media use and, unlike Ross et al. (2009), found a significant correlation between personality types and usage of Facebook features. Mehdizadeh's research (2010) shows that narcissistic individuals and those with lower self-confidence publish more self-promotional content and, in general, spend more time online than those who are not narcissistic. Furthermore, when researching identity and self-presentation on blogs and Second Life (SL) online video game, Bullingham & Vasconcelos (2013) found that bloggers and SL gamers tended to present their offline selves in the online context by highlighting certain facets of their personality. Participants admitted they did not believe that identity changes in the transition to the online context, and therefore they did not want to act deceptively. Moreover, Taber & Whittaker (2018) found that users' self-reported personality traits are affected depending on which social media platform they use; in their case, they compared Facebook and Snapchat.

2.3.1. Imagined audience

The imagined audience plays a vital role in how individuals represent themselves (Goffman, 1956), and scholars have found it immensely interesting in social media research. The concept refers to "the mental conceptualisation of the people with whom we are communicating" (Litt, 2012, p.331). Likewise, when self-presenting on social media, the audience is said to be crucial because they assess the impression (Hollenbaugh, 2021). Online performers can perceive the audience as abstract (superficial perception of the audience) or target imagined audience (a specific type of audience) (Litt & Hargittai, 2016).

Researchers had various focuses when investigating the phenomenon. Lowe-Calverley & Grieve (2018) found that users think thoroughly about their audience's perception when creating and sharing online content. Furthermore, Jung & Rader (2016) looked at concerns for privacy between producers and consumers on Facebook and found that both sides' concerns for privacy were equal. Nevertheless, consumers thought producers' published content was more private than producers. Likewise, Bacev Giles and Haji's (2017) research proves that the audience overestimates positive traits and underestimates negative ones. These positive impressions were caused by images posted on social media.

When addressing different audiences in social media, context collapse may happen (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Costa, 2018; Triggs et al., 2021; Loh & Walsh, 2021). Costa's (2018) research on Facebook conducted in one Turkish city found out that the context collapse, which Goffman (1956) describes as a phenomenon when people portray different images of themselves to different audiences in different social contexts, is based on a Western-centric perspective. Costa (Ibid) found that locals created numerous Facebook profiles in Turkey. Each profile connected them to a specific group of people, friends, family, or colleagues, in essence, to a different audience, disrupting the context collapse.

Furthermore, it has been claimed that social media affordances can influence users to self-disclose information (Trepte, 2015), but as Krämer & Schäwel (2020) found, social media users still carefully negotiate the advantages and disadvantages of self-disclosing online. That might depend on the audience as well. French & Read (2013) found that the extent of self-disclosed information online is affected by the type and size of the audience that sees the content, and Bazarova & Choi's (2014) results suggest that when people have less control over their audience, they tend to disclose less private information; therefore, their level of anonymity rises. Likewise, even before users consider the audience, their level of anonymity is higher because of the nature of online communication (Schlosser, 2020). Defined as the level at which the message's communicator is unknown to receivers (Scott, 1998; Evans et al., 2017), anonymity has become one of the most prevalent affordances in social media platforms, alongside persistence and visibility (Hollenbaugh, 2021). Those who researched anonymity found that chances for disclosing specific content increase when users use a nickname or a pseudonym (Ma et al., 2016). However, content from an anonymous account does not influence the quality of

discussions, Jaidka et al. (2022) found. People go anonymous for various reasons. Earlier research from Kang et al. (2013) shows that people go anonymous because they want to be involved in groups with unique interests, network, share work or art materials, and exchange advice. In the later research, Kang et al. (2016) looked at self-disclosure on anonymous applications, Whisper and YikYak. They discovered that people use these anonymous platforms to: give or get social validation, establish connections, prevent context collapse and self-presentation issues, and share their feelings. Interestingly, anonymity utilisation is similar across various cultures (Guo & Caine, 2021).

2.4. Self-presentation on Couchsurfing

Research has touched on the self-presentation on Couchsurfing (Zuev, 2008; Bialski & Batorski, 2010; Liu et al., 2016; Cherney, 2014; Pera et al., 2016; Chen, 2018; Miguel, 2018). Self-presenting on Couchsurfing helps users to get familiar with each other, increasing the levels of trust and influencing potential offline meetings (Bialski & Batorski, 2010). As opposed to other social media platforms, Couchsurfing's primary function is the connection of strangers rather than familiar individuals (Rosen, 2011). Therefore, self-presentation is vital if users wish to participate in the community successfully.

The self-presentation on Couchsurfing starts with the profile organised around the "About" section (Image 2), which includes personal description and interests (Miguel, 2018) and expands with features like photographs (Image 4), references, and verification. As Liu (2012) found, couchsurfers[1] present themselves in a positive tone stressing the emotional parts, and they do it to make themselves more attractive within the community. Likewise, participants in Liu's paper admitted to paying more attention to the "overall self-presentation style" and references that others have written when deciding on a host or a surfer. Likewise, vouches and friend connections are also more important for couchsurfers than one's self-presentation (Liu, 2012). According to Teng et al. (2010), the reputation system on Couchsurfing is not that useful because many users tend to leave positive references, although the overall experience could not have been characterised as positive. That is mainly because of the fear of getting bad reviews back (Miguel, 2018).

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[1] *A member of the Couchsurfing social media platform who travels and looks for Couchsurfing hosts in the places they travel to*

When investigating trust on Couchsurfing, Cherney (2014) received results similar in some ways to Liu's (2012). Cherney (2014) found that hosts do not give as much attention to written text and photographs as to references and direct messages from a host/guest. Nevertheless, there are few instances that users seem to pay attention to in profile, photographs, and couch requests. In profiles, the "thoroughness of the information" (Cherney, 2014, p.91) or detailed personal description with an obvious investment of time. Photographs, as participants replied, serve as a precautionary identity confirmation tool (Cherney, 2014). As Zuev (2008) pointed out, there is a tendency among Couchsurfing users to back up their descriptive presentation with visuals, strengthening the audience's opinion on good intentions and trustworthiness of themselves. For Zuev, images are "a resource for establishing trust and extending one's social network" (2008, p.2). Even though profile descriptions and photographs are essential, the message in the couch request seems as crucial as references. Cherney's (2014) interviewees mentioned that they would usually accept couch requests with a personalised message that does not stress a free stay but information found in the host's profile and why the writer chose the host.

Chen (2018) looked at how couchsurfers utilise online tools to handle meetings and how they behave when they physically meet other users. To investigate that, Chen appropriated Goffman's impression management model and looked at different aspects of online and offline performance. For the online performance, she found self-presentation and couch requests immensely important. Offline performance, reciprocal selection, reference system and the backstage, hosts' expectation of intercultural interaction, the uneasiness of being a surfer-tourist, and Couchsurfing's administrative power generate the authentic experience that the platform promises to create (Chen, 2018). She drew on Hogan's exhibition theory of social media (2010) when describing personal profiles as "the stage of individual members' online exhibition" (Chen, 2018, p.111), which allows users to demonstrate their personality. Likewise, she looked at couch requests and found that couchsurfers tend to express a worldly-wise attitude and concluded that they present an "idealised image" of themselves.

Furthermore, when Pera et al. (2016) explored the manifestation of archetypes in self-descriptions of couchsurfers, they found that users in their profiles embody behaviours and

values. However, not everyone can provide information that is satisfying to readers. Research has found that social media users understand social media affordances for self-presentation differently because of their personality, skills, and experience (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010). Likewise, Chen et al. (2018) claim that Couchsurfing self-presentation features constrain members' self-presentation because the questions meant to show users' diverse nature lead users towards selective disclosure of personal information that is seen as appropriate within the surfer's community.

2.5. The Literature Gap

To this date, the self-presentation component of the Couchsurfing platform has been explored in research that focuses on other elements (Liu, 2012; Cherney et al., 2014; Chen, 2018). Liu (2012) researched couchsurfers' motivations and trust, how motivation influences presentation, and how the establishment of trust relates to reading others' profiles. Likewise, Cherney (2014) focused on trust and tried to understand how trust is achieved through online communication with the help of uncertainty reduction and predicted outcome value theories. Chen (2018) also appropriated Goffman's performance theory to explore how Couchsurfing's performance is achieved through different means. She does use Goffman's model but not strictly to investigate self-presentation as much as a performance that makes Couchsurfing specific in its travel style. Even though some of them touched on the self-presentation aspect of Couchsurfing, no one used Goffman's impression management model to explore how Couchsurfing users present themselves.

Couchsurfing's unique goal of fostering "meaningful interactions" can be hindered if users start to feel that the usage of technology does not provide them with "the expected social result" (Parks, 2010). Likewise, suppose users do not utilise the social media platform as intended by the designers and the community. In that case, they will not be able to participate in the online community. Therefore, to comprehend self-presentation phenomena on Couchsurfing, which Picone (2015) claims makes online presence together with self-disclosure, the use of Goffman's impression management theory is vital in this research. By using the lens of impression management, this research will inform its readers about the techniques Couchsurfing users utilise when self-presenting on this peculiar social media platform.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This research project is exploratory and belongs to the qualitative type of research. Qualitative research allows the collection of a rich and detailed amount of information from a relatively small number of people and cases (Glesne, 2016). First, I will present the research design and explain the theoretical perspective this research is built on. Next, I will discuss the sampling criteria and how the participants were found and approached. Furthermore, I will elaborate on two data collection techniques I have used – semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis (About section, photographs and couch request messages). Then, I will clarify how the data was analysed. At last, I will consider ethical concerns that might arise, and I will present how I will minimise all the risks in this social media research.

3.2. Research design

The present research is a case study inspired by ethnographic traditions. As this research aims to explore a self-presentation phenomenon within the community of Couchsurfing, the case study's research design, which is said to explore in-depth people or groups of people (Mohajan, 2018), and in which the investigator "explores a bounded system (a *case*) (…) through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (Cresswell, 2007, p.73) is aligned with the aim of the research. The case explored in this research is the community on Couchsurfing, and it will be of exemplifying (i.e. representative) case study character. Bryman (2012) refers to Yin (2009) when he explains that exemplifying a case study aims to seize conditions and everyday situations and that the cases are often chosen because they can exemplify "a broader category of which it is a member" (Bryman, p.70). Likewise, I am aware that the generalizability of this case study research is low. For some, it can be considered a weakness to use such an approach in investigating phenomena (Bryman, 2012). However, as the research aim coincides with Bryman's words of exemplifying "a broader category", i.e., self-presentation in the Couchsurfing world, it hopes to add another layer to how Couchsurfing is perceived and how people present themselves on the Couchsurfing social media platform.

As an experienced Couchsurfing user with 20 references, I understand the philosophy of the platform and its features very well, as I have used most of them, with hosting being the least

appropriate feature (only once have I hosted). Therefore, I could not have escaped the role of being an insider. The role of an insider has been described as having "easy access to informants, reliability of collected data, and the success of the fieldwork" (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010, p.18). The dichotomy between insiders' and outsiders' positions are usually discussed in ethnography studies (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Coombs & Osborne, 2012). Being an insider, together with my long-time immersion into the Couchsurfing community before and during the research, contributes to this case study being inspired and partially built on ethnographic traditions.

3.3. Sampling

As qualitative research aims to understand a phenomenon (Forman et al., 2007), I have decided that the number of participants ought not to be high because of, on one side, the size and time constraints of the present thesis, and on the other because of the nature of qualitative research. Therefore, twelve semi-structured interviews and user profile analyses were conducted with twelve Couchsurfing users who were active on the platform in the last month. Considering the gender gap in many research projects (Holman et al., 2018), and even though scholars have found that there are more males than females on Couchsurfing (Pultar, 2011), this research analysed the data from six females and six males (see Table 1.). Ten participants are based in Europe, and two are in Asia and South America. Experienced Couchsurfing members share common traits of being 'global citizens' with similar values and beliefs (Shapiro, 2012). Still, I know that geographical differences can play a big part in appropriating social media tools (Pultar, 2011).

The sampling criteria were constructed around active Couchsurfing profiles (active in the last month) and experienced users (>5 references). Sampling relied on non-probability sampling types – convenience and purposive sampling. Convenience is used when there is a need to find participants that can easily participate in the research (Etikan et al., 2016). On the other hand, purposive sampling was conducted by deciding if the Couchsurfing users who messaged me fit within the research criteria. Bryman (2012) writes about sampling people relevant to the research question.

Table 1

Participant overview

Name	Age	Gender	Nationality - Location
Monika	37	F	German - Germany
Jana	26	F	Serbian - Serbia
Gulce	28	F	Turkish - Turkiye
Tamara	31	F	Serbian - Poland
Marion	41	F	French - France
Marijana	34	F	Croatian - Croatia
Paulo	28	M	Brazilian - Brazil
Kristijan	29	M	Croatian - Croatia
Jose	36	M	Argentinian/Italian - France
Viraj	59	M	Indian - Singapore
Aleksandar	42	M	Montenegrian - Serbia
Lorenzo	26	M	Italian - Sweden

Note. All participants have been given fake names, howere their age, gender and nationality – location are true

Most participants have been found by appropriating Couchsurfing's search engine in which the option "explore" was chosen together with the city's name. After one chooses the city, they can ask or answer questions in the feature "Discussion". There, I have published calls for participants in more than thirty cities worldwide, which is considered essential in ethnographic research (Karen, 2008).

Image 1

Search engine in Couchsurfing
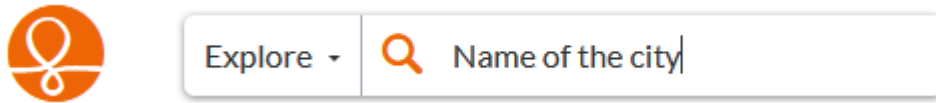
I was looking for more than 18 years old users whom I deemed would contribute to the research's aim. When people have expressed a desire to participate in the research, I send them an information sheet and consent form if they fulfilled the requirements. After they had returned the consent form, signed it, and ticked it up, the semi-structured interviews were conducted and after that, user profile analyses.

Being transparent in this research phase is pivotal in establishing a good relationship with informants (Hine, 2015) for the actual interviews. I updated my profile by explicitly describing myself as a researcher. In the call for participants, I provided a Linkedin account so that my credibility and authenticity could be strengthened and the users feel less insecure about participating in the research.

3.4. Data collection techniques

3.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews are a beneficial methodological tool when there is an aim to investigate people's experiences from their perspective (Salmons, 2014; Hine, 2015). As the aim of this research is exploratory and investigates specific human behaviour in a particular social context, a semi-structured interview, which allows flexibility in asking questions, giving answers and clarifying ambiguous information (Bryman, 2012), is a suitable research method in that task. As was done in previous research (Miguel, 2016), I conducted interviews first because I wanted to get their verbal consent.

I prepared the interview guide (appendix 5) with questions before the first interview, and during the first three interviews, I noticed that some questions were not understood well or had not helped in reaching the answer to the research question. That is why the interview guide was edited during the first three interviews until I found questions that participants fully understood

and made them discuss certain aspects of self-presentation more thoroughly. The interview guide can be found in the appendix (appendix 5). Interviews lasted between 38 and 68 minutes. In total, they lasted 574 minutes (i.e., 9.34 hours). All participants were given fake names, and all interviews were conducted in English.

3.4.2. Qualitative content analysis

Alongside semi-structured interviews, I conducted a qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is an empirical method for analysing human communication, live or recorded (Scheufele, 2008). It is also research question oriented, and it aims to answer the question or questions at the end of the analysis (Mayring, 2019). Before I could do content analysis, I needed to somehow prepare the data for the coding and data analysis part. The first phase of the content analysis was done as follows. I have extracted participants' information in their About section and put it into the Word document. After doing that for every participant, I looked at their photographs. I have verbatim described photographs they have published in their profiles (e.g. "couchsurfer hugging a tree in Amazona") in a separate Word document. After that, I extracted the couch requests messages they sent to Couchsurfing hosts and put them into a separate Word document.

3.5. Data analysis

Two data analysis methods were conducted. For interviews, thematic data analysis has been done, and for the users' profiles, photographs and couch requests, I have conducted a content analysis. The data collection phase was described above, and after that, I started the coding phase. Coding refers to a process whereby the collected data is classified into components, and then these components are given identification (Bryman, 2012).

First, I have looked at content from their profiles (About section, photographs and couch requests), and I have coloured segments which I believed were appropriate to be a code. For example, Monika (37F, Germany) wrote, "hospitality is precious for me", so I have coded that as "believes hospitality is precious". Sometimes, participants shared a poem or personal philosophy, and these instances were coded as "poem" and "personal philosophy". I coded all the information from participants' profiles and then looked for the most frequent codes (more than in 6 profiles). If some codes appeared less, they were left out (Forman et al., 2007). The

same applies to couch requests. For the photographs, after I have briefly described all the photographs on their profile, I have coded them. For example, a photograph depicting a "couchsurfer hugging a tree in Amazona" was coded as "couchsurfer travelling". All the codes that emerged in the content analysis have been categorised (e.g. beliefs, passions, hobbies, interests). Content analysis stopped here because I wanted to see what thematic analysis could show me and because I knew similar things were discussed in the interviews.

Before I started the data analysis from interviews, it was crucial to transcribe the audio-recorded data (Bryman, 2012). Interviews were transcribed verbatim in the Otter.ai transcription tool. There were many grammatical and hearing mistakes, so I decided to "clean" the incoherent speech components like um and oh, wrongly written words, and of course, anything that could identify participants; consequently, the text was more understandable and easier to analyse (Forman et al., 2007). Management of the raw data opened the way for the coding part of the analysis. Using NVivo qualitative data analysis computer software, each interview was imported into the program and coded. Next, a thematic analysis was conducted. It is said that thematical analyses call for active involvement and interpretation from the researcher and that they focus on identifying and describing explicit and implicit concepts within analysed data, i.e. themes (Guest, 2012). Likewise, I constantly checked on the initial interview data during coding and when themes emerged, and those that were not deemed relevant to the research question were left out (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Findings in the thematic analysis coincided with content analysis to some extent. The decision was made to merge the codes found in the content and thematic analysis with the first-level codes. For instance, codes that appeared as first-level codes were interests and meaningfulness, and they formed the overall theme of personality. Ferreday (2013) claimed that such a method is beneficial because it allows researchers to fathom particularity and eventuality in online and offline life. Four themes were discovered: anonymity, imagined audience, personality and private performance. They are discussed through three sections which lead readers from the initial step of creating the profile, filling it with information (discovered in the research and that they admitted, e.g. interests, meaningfulness), and putting on a private performance in the couch requests' feature. The data found is discussed in relation to Goffman's impression management model. Miguel (2016) did similar work in her paper on how people build intimacy

and manage privacy on Badoo, Couchsurfing, and Facebook social media platforms. Analysis of couch request messages has not been done, to my knowledge. As this is highly private and intimate information, I have carefully approached this part of the research. Except in written consent, I asked participants to confirm these messages' use during interviews verbally.

3.6. Ethics

The transition of social life to the online setting produced opportunities (Pagoto & Nebeker, 2019) and challenges (Hibbin et al., 2018) for researchers. Some scholars (Hine, 2008; Samuel & Buchanan, 2020) have written that public and private data are the first ethical concerns. The discussion refers to the availability of personal data on social media platforms. Some scholars have argued that social media users have agreed to a set of terms and conditions when creating a profile on a platform (Townsend & Wallace, 2016), while others dispute this saying that researchers cannot justify their actions by simply accepting such circumstances (Boyd & Crawford, 2012). My line of argument goes in favour of the latter. Therefore, I have asked participants, first in the written form and then in the verbal form, to confirm their participation in the research.

Couchsurfing does not operate like most social media; scrolling through the news feed, liking, and commenting on other people's posts do not exist. However, in Couchsurfing, users can comment on other users' queries by helping them in various ways. Without creating an account and logging in, it is impossible to see such content except for public users' profiles. Non-logged-in internet users cannot see the profile, except if users purposely change their privacy settings. In these circumstances, when users of the platform might not consider the channel as a public space to which everyone has access, it is essential to explain to them the research goal and means that will be done to achieve research aims (Roberts, 2015). Their acceptance must come after they have read, understood, and signed the consent form.

Kleinberg (2007) discussed how personal anonymity could be breached with social media data more than a decade ago. As with the public/private data debate, offline research has consented to anonymise obtained data permanently, but in an online setting, this might be more complex for big or aggregated data when reproduced in published materials (Narayanan & Shmatikov, 2009). All participants were granted anonymity by giving them fake names, and interview and profile data were erased upon the completion of the research.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Introduction

As mentioned in the literature review, Goffman (1956) saw social interactions as performances in which actors try to impress the audience. He named backstage the setting in which individuals act in front of others, which Goffman called front stage and the environment in which there are no observers of the performance. The border between the two stages was evident in the face-to-face reality, but in the social media context, the boundaries between the two get blurred (Richey et al., 2016). The discrepancy between social media designers' intentions and users' utilisation of these platforms contributes to the border between stages. On the Couchsurfing platform, transparency is highly encouraged when filling the profile (Jenny, 2022), but some users do not strictly follow these guidelines. The discussion chapter starts with a section that explains the distinct features of a Couchsurfing profile and the first decision to make when creating the profile: whether to use a real name or nickname. Then it continues with a section about how couchsurfers represent their personality via the platform, where interests, meaningfulness, and personal information concealed are discussed. Finally, in the last section, I present users' enactment of performance in Couchsurfing's unique feature of couch requests. Likewise, I argue why this feature calls for a more nuanced view of audience segregation and context collapse.

4.2. Creating the Couchsurfing profile

Self-presenting over social media platforms is more complex than face-to-face interaction (Devito et al., 2017). When users put a performance on social media, it means they generally address a much larger, heterogenous, and sometimes unknown audience (Bernstein et al., 2013). Because of that, social media users strategise their self-presentation online (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016), and the asynchronous nature of these platforms helps them strategise (Schlosser, 2020). Even after the content is published, it is possible to edit it, giving users power over impressions in the long run.

When thinking about the Couchsurfing platform in Goffman's terms (1956), the platform itself combines elements of frontstage and backstage, allowing users to disclose some information while hiding others (Richey et al., 2016). Goffman (1956) made a distinction between the two

regions. However, he also pointed out that "there are many regions which function at one time and in one sense as a front region and at another time and in another sense as a back region" (p.127). By presenting themselves on Couchsurfing's About and photograph sections, users enter the front stage once they publish personal information and remain there if they actively use the platform and engage with others. Expressions on Couchsurfing are mainly intended, i.e., given (Goffman, 1956), with fewer given off elements. Still, there is a possibility for given off expressions as well. Aspling (2011) discussed that writing tone and style, the activity (frequency of posting content, answering messages), and privacy settings, among other elements, constitute the given off expressions in social media.

Image 2

Overview of the Couchsurfing profile, About section

When creating their profiles, couchsurfers must decide whether to use their real name or a nickname to remain somehow anonymous online. As mentioned in the literature review, anonymity is considered one of the three most prevalent social media affordances (Hollenbaugh, 2021), and it is claimed that online communication usually raises the anonymity of the users (Schlosser, 2020). Hiding behind a pseudonym is said to increase the chances of

disclosing specific content (Ma et al., 2016) and Suler (2004) characterised disclosed content either as a benign online inhibition (relating to extremely personal information: emotion, wishes, compassion or affection) or toxic online inhibition (essentially abusive and rude content). Couchsurfing does not strictly advise using the real name on the platform, but it encourages users to "be honest and detailed" and to "set your standards" (Jenny, 2022). In most cases, they provide full names and detailed personal information (Chen, 2018) and tend to exhibit benign inhibition.

In this study, there was no difference in the type of disclosed content when users were more anonymous, which is in line with Jaidka et al. (2022) findings in which they discovered that anonymity does not change the quality level of discussion. However, in my research, it was interesting when participants revealed the intention behind pseudonyms and the type of non-disclosed information. The majority of participants claimed they portrayed themselves accurately, even though five participants did not put out their real full names on their profiles, raising the anonymity level of their presentation. Reasons for this, they admit, were sometimes anecdotal, practical in other times and in two cases, security related.

"When friends told me you could look for somebody on Google and find him, that's when I put my name off because I had my full name on Couchsurfing. After that, I just left my first name. "– Marion (41F, France)

Gulce (28F, Turkiye) said that she did not want to put her full name because she did not believe it was necessary. This answer gets contextualised when she compares verification to a tracking system which she does not trust.

Users' profiles on Couchsurfing are organised around the main hub called profile which contains six sections – About, My Home, Photos, References, Friends, and Favorites. The most important part is the section About, which encompasses overview (brief biographical data), About me, and potentially Old School Badges (a vouching system that was an integral feature in previous versions of Couchsurfing in which users vouched for each other providing extra safety for future interactants) and Groups that users can join (e.g. Hitchhikers, Queer Couchsurfers) (Chen, 2018). Joining a specific group might indirectly affect one's online identity (Papacharissi, 2009). This has been discussed within studies of social identities, where it is believed that social identities are determined based on the groups one belongs to (Fielding & Hornsey, 2016). However,

participants had not considered groups to be important when they were presenting themselves. The affiliated groups did not point to any mismatch between written descriptions in the profile and answers in interviews. In the About me area, users are expected to disclose information as the platform suggests it through sub-sections (e.g. Why I'm on Couchsurfing, Interests, Music, Movies and Books), or they can take the initiative and add whatever they feel like in each section (Image 2 and 3).

Image 3

About section

Why I'm on Couchsurfing

HOW I PARTICIPATE IN COUCHSURFING

Giving tips about Paris or the towns I visited
Meeting CS travelers and hanging out with them
Language exchange
Organizing events

I ate in that place, food is good and it's not everyday that you can eat in an art gallery :

https://www.lecostaud.fr/

Also a good initiative, an arabic restaurant whose cook and tenant are hearing impaired :

http://1000et1signes.com/

COUCHSURFING EXPERIENCE

I have surfed with Neil in Glasgow, an absolutely great experience! Scottish people are really friendly and Glasgow is beautiful!
Have also surfed with a student and with a family in Vienna , I was impressed by the working capacity of the Austrians.

Hosted 2 times, but can't do it anymore, my place is way too small :'(

Made a flat exchange with a girl in Barcelona

Visiting Paris with some CSers, it's refreshing to see their enthusiasm about The Eiffel Tower and their excitement for just being there. Helps you to see your town with new eyes.

Interests

Meeting new persons, music, good food, language exchange (looking to improve Russian and practice English) , museums, exhibits, theater, Japan, Russia, art, architecture, street art, concerts, walks.

| books | theater | movies | music | food | museums | musicals |

Music, Movies, and Books

Muse, Placebo, The Libertines, Sia, Billy Talent, Taty, DDT, Zemfira, Daft Punk, Air, The Keane, The Chase, Markus Schulz, Luke, Vitalic, Gabriel and Dresden, Kavinsky, The Retuses, Mylène Farmer, Radiohead, Pomme, Miossec

Then, there is the My Home section, in which people who host can write about sleeping arrangements in their homes. Photographs can be added in the Photos area, which consists of users' photographs of themselves and their homes (Image 4). Photographs have become one of the social media's most important presentation aspects (Miguel, 2016). In the analysis of users' photographs, two kinds of photographs have been discovered, individual travel-related portraits and travel-related portraits with other people. There are, of course, other types of photographs that were included in participants' profiles, e.g. with family, in a work or art environment, or a restaurant, but the sample was too small for a pattern. The commonality between all participants' photographs is that they are travel related.

„I posted photographs mostly from my travelling across the world. Many photos, that I considered to be interesting, in some way or another, I just place them and I usually try to put some photos that could tell the others that I have been to a lot of places, so that they know I'm a traveller as well." – Aleksandar, 42M, Montenegro

Image 4

Photographs section, all identifying elements are hidden
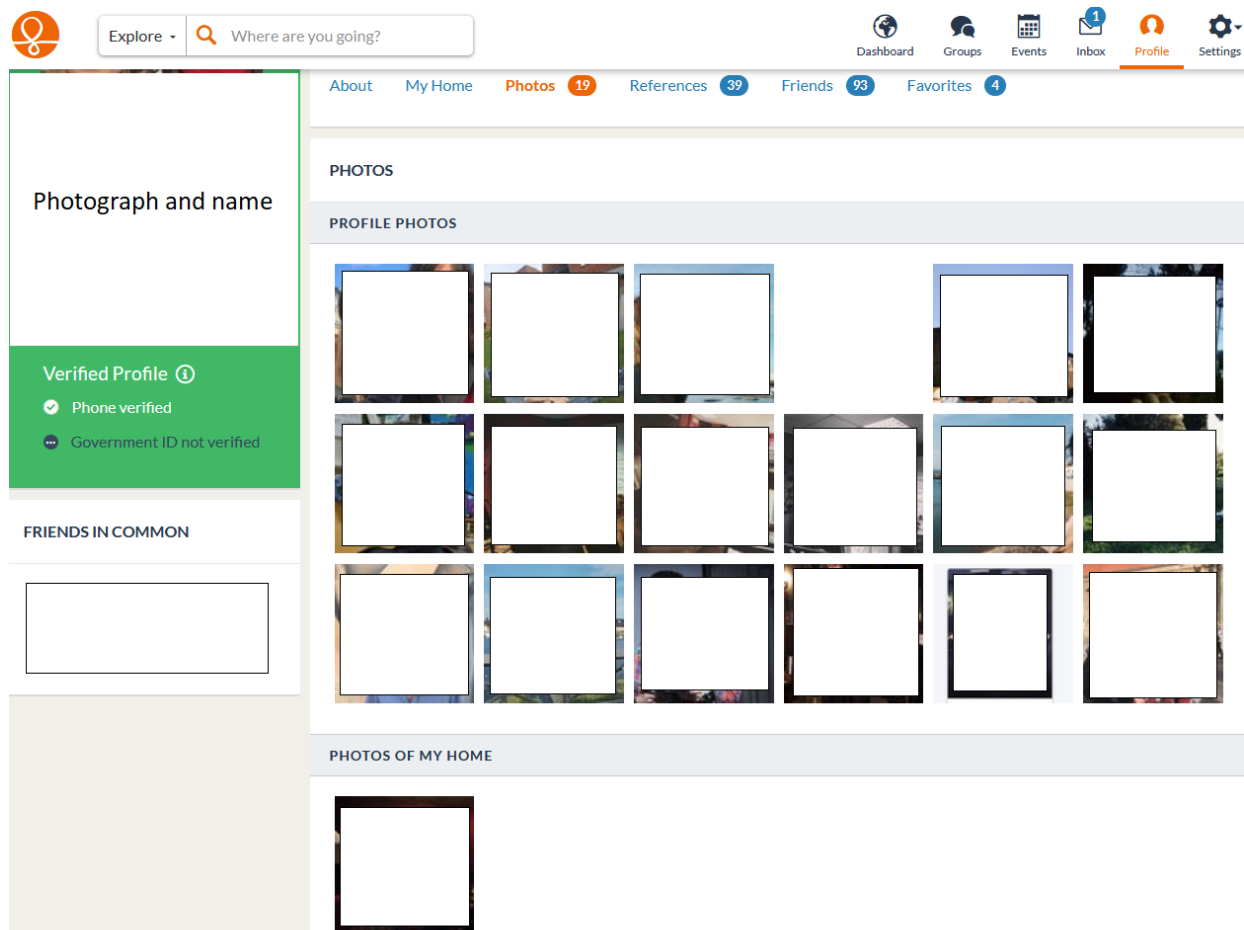
As Jose claims, photographs "are important because they have to show your personality, without talking, without knowing someone". Cherney et al. (2014) found this as well. Likewise, 'showing yourself' is in line with Mendelson and Papacharissi's (2010) findings about social media users who understand that images represent them before the audience on their social media. Likewise, it confirms Goffman's claims that an individual engages in strategic activities "to convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey" (1956, p. 16). It is their interest to perform values (travel, adventure) accepted within the stage. As Ellison et al. (2006) pointed out, photographs are published "to warrant or support claims made in textual descriptions" (p.430), which is like Zuev (2008), who claimed that images in Couchsurfing are used to strengthen written descriptions and show the audience that they are trustworthy.

Marion (41F, France) elaborates further on the kinds of photographs she posted on her profile,

"I posted photographs when I had a good time, when I was enjoying myself, and sometimes I posted photographs with other couchsurfers. We took pictures for memory and I posted them so after I can look at them and think oh, yeah, this person was nice. It's for memories. I post pictures of good times."

Marion's but also Gulce's (29F, Turkiye), and Kristijan's (29M, Croatia) answers resemble Salimkhan et al.'s (2010) words who said that on social media sites, people use photographs to tell a story about their past, current, and potential self. Users use Couchsurfing's front stage to establish their travel identity through photographic memories of who they were and what they experienced - ultimately, what made them who they are today. This also relates to findings in personal documentation research in which Sinn & Syn (2014) discovered that people present their true selves and exhibit their daily life on Facebook.

The next field is References. This concept is a written description of an experience one couchsurfer shared with the other. This feature serves as a safety valve and a tool for online trust-building (Rosen et al., 2011). The last two fields in the larger About area are Friends and Favorites. Befriending someone online correlates to group belongings and can affect one's identity (Donath & Boyd, 2004). Liu's (2012) participants admitted that friend connections were more important for them than the presentation in the profile. In this research, participants did not consider friends' lists a part of their self-presentation performance. Likewise, the Favorites field has not been detected that it enriches users' self-presentation.

4.3. Personality disclosure on the profile

Personality is "the complex of characteristics that distinguishes an individual" (Merriam-Webster, 2022). Personality in this research is not based on types of personality traits applied in the research mentioned in the literature review but on several instances relating to the personality as "a set of distinctive traits and characteristics" (Ibid). Couchsurfing advises to "show your personality so you can meet the members who will appreciate it" (Jenny, 2022). In this paper, personality was constituted through the revelation of users' interests (hobbies, passions and art affinities), photographs that reinforce their identities as travellers, and all that while having in mind a meaningful component of their presentation in which specific personal information is concealed.
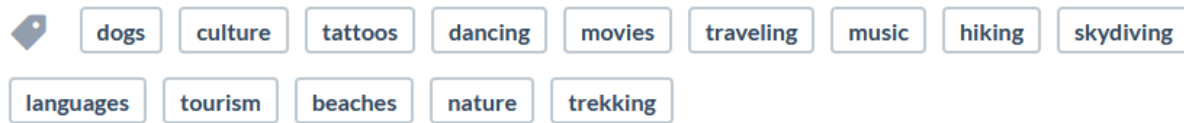
4.3.1. Interests

As discovered in interviews, before performing on the front stage, expression of personality is an overt backstage goal of almost every participant. On the frontstage, personality is shown through hobbies, passions, and art affinities, which on the Coushsurfing website are usually gathered in the section' interests' (images 2 and 3). Most popular interests were travelling, meeting new people, exchanging opinions, art, doing sports, and dancing. Interests are rich and various in number and appear in tag clouds (image 1).

Photographs are a mean of showing interests. Even though they might not actively travel all the time, on the front stage of Couchsurfing (Goffman, 1956), users portray themselves as travel-orientated, adventurous individuals. On backstage, almost all of them confirm they see themselves as such. Gulce (28, F, Turkiye) said, "I posted photos from my travels and that's also a way to show that I am a traveller", and Aleksandar (42M, Montenegro), as shown above, had a very similar answer. Tamara (31F, Serbia) said that she posted photographs from important travel moments, and Lorenzo (26M, Italy), Marijana (34F, Croatia), and Viraj (59M, India) had similar intentions. Oliveira et al. (2020) found that "perceived enjoyment" was the first reason people publish travel-related experiences on social media. In this research, couchsurfers post visual content to reinforce their identities as travellers.

This goes in line with Decrop et al. (2018) study that showed that couchsurfers share similar beliefs, interests, values, and life philosophies. Aleksandar (42M, Montenegro), for instance, writes: "I've done a lot of interesting stuff in my life: played basketball, learned tango, been on couple of astronomical summer schools, done a lot of trekking, learned about photography"; while Gulce (28F, Turkiye) wrote: "I've always been a reader (…) I love challenges and adventures (…) I always enjoy having positive people, who are comfortable with themselves ". She admitted that she wanted to hint at her personality, and Kristijan (29M, Croatia) disclosed that he wanted to describe his daily life and interests.

Image 5

Tag cloud

| dogs | culture | tattoos | dancing | movies | traveling | music | hiking | skydiving |
| languages | tourism | beaches | nature | trekking |

Goffman (1956) claimed that "when an individual (...) makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect" (p.6/7). When looked through the impression management lens, couchsurfers want the audience to treat them as adventurous, curious, open-minded, and overall - interesting. Schlosser (2020) argued that people disclose true information about themselves because they want to present an acceptable self-image with generally desirable characteristics. In that sense, couchsurfers' disclosed interests follow the platform's philosophy of adventure and travel. However, Goffman (1956) drew on sociologist Hughes's (ref) work when he said that people "tend to conceal from our audience all evidence of 'dirty work' ", and Marion (41F, France) elaborated on the concealment by saying that "if you look like boring or pessimistic (...) nobody wants to meet you". From participants' answers, it seems that an idealised, personality-reflecting presentation is the one they strive for. This partially goes in line with Back et al.'s (2010) argument that people on social media profiles do not tend to create an idealised virtual identity but a real personality. Lorenzo admits that he "wanted to enforce the positive sides, show the positive sides of me, that I've been living in a lot of countries, and so on."

Participants in this research strategise their presentation by selecting positive personality traits. They have not changed their behaviour or performance because of the stage, but rather they have found a platform where they can appropriately express one or a few aspects of their personality.

Most interviewees revealed that they thought about the audience when they were presenting. For example, Paulo (29M, Brazil) and Marijana (34F, Croatia) considered the audience, and she described herself in a way that she would like to read about others.

"So I did consider the audience because those are the users that are going to share something with me. I intend to share my life, my space or their space when I'm travelling, so I think we should at least know a bit of each other. I think it's important even because it can avoid some sort of incident. "– Paulo, 29M, Brazil

This discovery is not new. Lowe-Calverley & Grieve (2018) confirm that social media users consider the audience significantly in their online production. Likewise, these findings strengthen the claim that Couchsurfing's About and photographs sections can be seen as a front stage in which users publish private information and engage in the performance with the audience. Litt & Hargittai's (2016) research indicates that social media users imagine the audience in two ways: as abstract (in an uncertain and general way) and target imagined audience (specific and known). Results of this research draw on those reported in Litt & Hargittai (Ibid) in that users' perception of audiences varies between abstract and general, but with a finding that they consider the audience to be like them, travel orientated. Homophily has been researched within Couchsurfing (Kunz & Seshadri, 2015; Liu et al., 2016; Decrop et al., 2018). Kunz & Seshadri (2015) found that noticeable similarities between travellers were one of the factors users of online travel platforms consider before they engage in offline relationships. Similarly, Liu et al. (2016) concluded that couchsurfers share comparable characteristics, while Decrop et al. (2016) discovered that such homophily is based on values couchsurfers believe they share. This research indicates similar findings because hosts' self-presentation goals are characterised by homophily. Viraj (59M, India) mentioned his goal of attracting "the right kinds of travellers", Lorenzo (26M, Italy) admitted to wanting to host "more or less same kind of people", and Aleksandar (42M, Montenegro) discussed his self-presentation saying that he revealed personal information "to meet people who have similar interests". This points us back to Goffman (1956), who claimed that performers perform with a goal of effectively conveying the definition of the situation, which in the Couchsurfing world seems to be the presentation of a "cosmopolitan" attitude (Chen, 2018).

4.3.2. Meaningful presentation of values and interests

Meaningful presentation is as important as personality presentation for most interviewees; users address it under different names like value and originality. Tamara (31F, Serbia) considers value presentation pivotal in Couchsurfing, as well as Kristijan (29M, Croatia), who openly stated that he wanted to show "unique sides" with his photographs alongside biographical information when entering the front stage of Couchsurfing. Monika (37F, Germany) mentions that she was aiming for concise originality, Lorenzo (26M, Italy) believes it is important to "say something

meaningful about yourself", and Paulo (29M, Brazil) told us through the self-questioning of "who is the soul in this body?".

"I had professional photos, or some kind of unconventional photos (…) I thought maybe I could show a different side of me as a musician, in a traditional outfit, to show something unique." – Kristijan (29M, Croatia)

These findings correlate to Pera et al. (2016) findings. They claimed that stories users told over their profiles manifest their "behaviour and value patterns" (p.52). It is not surprising that users admit the importance of meaningful presentation when Couchsurfing promotes the exchange of meaningful connections (Couchsurfing, 2022). In that sense, the Couchsurfing community operates as a society on a smaller scale that adheres to specific values. When on stage, individual performance is characterised by the acceptance of wider societal values they epitomise during the act (Goffman, 1956). Molz (2013) saw the Couchsurfing platform as a moral economy that facilitates more meaningful and authentic connections. In Goffman's (1956) terms, on the Couchsurfing stage, being authentic is what is appreciated and what can connect one to other authentic performances. Decrop et al. (2018) state that what makes Couchsurfing unique as a platform is the transformative power experienced through couch sharing or meetings with strangers. Such purpose and consequence of social media platform, to have an authentic experience with others, namely strangers, is what greatly differs, for instance, from the Facebook stage where users feel the need to belong and the need to self-present (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012) and where there is no premise to meet others or get anything meaningful from them. Taber & Whittaker's paper (2018) showed that social media affordances might influence self-reported personality traits on Facebook and Snapchat, pointing out that people use specific social media platforms to exhibit specific parts of their personality.

4.3.3 Concealing personal information

As mentioned in the literature review, an imagined audience represents a subjective perception of whom social media users communicate with (Litt, 2012). When users step onto the front stage of Couchsurfing, they aim to present their wishes and affections, therefore performing benign inhibition (Suler, 2004). Anyone can come and observe the performance on the front stage, i.e. the presentation on the profile if users do not change privacy settings to being visible only to Couchsurfing users. Chen (2018) found that some couchsurfers hide some things in real life from their hosts because it would discredit their "couchsurfer" impression. As found, users

also hide information when self-presenting online. Users admitted concealing specific information, which they would not mind disclosing privately if needed. The intention of deceiving has not been detected, but rather that of keeping private information - private. Participants said they would not disclose apartment photographs (Gulce, Jana), political or religious views (Lorenzo, Kristijan), sexual orientation (Lorenzo, Paulo), phone number and address (Marijana) and family-related information (Paulo). Nissenbaum's list (2009, as in Miguel, 2018) resembles participants' answers on, among others, political and religious beliefs and sexual orientation as undisclosed information on social media. Most participants mentioned sexual orientation as the information they would not disclose.

In addition, Krämer & Schäwel (2020) found that social media users cautiously weigh benefits and risks when self-disclosing online, and Trepte (2015) shows that social media cues generate biases because of which users rather disclose. Kristijan (29M, Croatia) admitted not disclosing political or religious views because he did not want to "make somebody else uncomfortable". This goes in line with context collapse, addressing the heterogeneous audience on social media because performers adapt the content and its depth. Hence, it is adequate for a broad, unknown audience (French & Read, 2013). Goffman (1956) claimed that performers would segregate the audience so that some parts of the performance would only be for a specific audience and others for others. Omitting personal facts suggests that some level of consideration of revealed content exists. It can be seen as a mechanism of wanting to please different audiences on social media, where audience segregation might be harder to achieve. Bazarova & Choi's (2014) study helps to scrutinise the audience segregation concept. They suggest that social media users disclose less personal information when they have less control over their audience. That seems to be the case in Couchsurfing, where the audience mostly comprises strangers. Couchsurfing users do not gather heterogeneous audiences (e.g. family, friends, colleagues) as they might on Facebook (Aspling, 2011). The audience on Couchsurfing is ephemeral and infrequent, dependent on the recurrence of performances such as last log-in time, couch request, hosting availability and others. Therefore, we should understand audience segregation and context collapse differently than in other social media platforms simply because of the nature of the stage.

4.4. Private performance in the couch requests

Even though it is considered a normal act in the Couchsurfing context, requesting a couch remains a highly intimate proposition that implies an investment of time and effort to write, read and analyse each other's profiles. Couch request is a feature that facilitates the first contact and trust-building process (Bialski & Batorski, 2010). It entails the writer's great adaption to the receiver, which minimises context collapse and maximises audience segregation. Couchsurfing (Vince, 2022) advises writing the host's name, introducing yourself, explicating timing, and arrival date, mentioning other travellers (if any), personalising the message, finding common ground, and above all, being polite. For hosts, it is suggested (Vince, 2022) to set guidelines and share them with the potential couchsurfer, so both performers are on the same page. The host has more power in this online performance (Chen, 2018).

Therefore, couch requests are performances in which an initial performer (sender) has a goal of finding an accommodation; to achieve this goal, they tend to use sign vehicles (e.g. language used to communicate, expectations, trip plans, promises and perhaps interests in common) to strengthen the facts presented in their profiles – front stage (Goffman, 1956). Monika's (37F, Germany) request exemplifies it.

Image 6

Couch request written by one of the participants

Arrival Date *

yyyy-mm-dd

☐ Date is flexible

Departure Date *

yyyy-mm-dd

☐ Date is flexible

Number of Travelers *

1

Message *

Ciao XXX,

From your references I can see you are a pretty active host and I am sure you will get tons of request. Anyway, I will give it a try, hoping mine will not be too crappy ;)

Do you feel like hosting for a night in early October? There is German Unity Day on October 3rd and I just spontaneoulsy booked some transport, after my last couch surfer told me about some art works, I now know want to see :D

Travelling made my trajectory from being a geographer to becoming an artist and so I am now a student of fine arts and arts education. My special interest is collaboration and I guess this is what made me sending you this request.

I am looking forward to spend some time looking at art the Venice Biennial and hopefully go couch surfing which is my great passion when travelling. I will be an easy guest, knowing how to get around (going from Treviso to Venice and back again). If you have time, I will be delighted to be a good interlocutor (at least this is what I heared other people say), because this is why I am on couch surfing, to meet other humans.

Kind regards,

Monika

Couch requests are private performances because the performer (sender) steps from the front stage for a big audience to the front stage aimed for a small audience, i.e. one observer. It is up to the audience to examine the validity of the performance (Goffman, 1956), and based on the decision, they join the performance and become an actor or avoid it. Goffman said that "a performer often engenders in his audience the belief that he is related to them in a more ideal way than is always the case" (Ibid, p.56). The same happens in the private couch request performances in which couchsurfers hope to connect to the host while having in mind the goal of finding accommodation. The sign vehicles mentioned above can be a misleading tool for the audience because the audience tends to believe the signs unravelled before their senses. However, misrepresentation (Goffman, 1956) has not been discovered. Furthermore, it was said that "when an individual plays a part, he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them" (Goffman, 1956, p. 10). Marion's (41F, France) opening of the request resembles the seriousness of Goffman's performer and implies the acquaintance between two unknown actors:

"Hi Ruth, do you have a tree finally or not? Cause I've seen some tree decorations made of chocolate, so if you have one could buy those? Otherwise, I can buy the melon and maybe some smoked ham to go with it..."

The nature of the web on which Couchsurfing lies allows the observer of the performance (Marion's receiver) to look at other stages in which personal information and previous Couchsurfing experience are available (Luo & Zhang, 2016) and assists the observer in the decision of performer's trustworthiness. To alleviate the receiver's decision-making process, Couchsurfing performers, as discovered, tend to show (Paulo, 28M, Brazil) or clearly state they read the potential host's profile (Monika, 37F, Germany), they provide background information not explicitly visible on their profile (Gulce, 28F, Turkiye), disclose interests they have (Lorenzo, 26F, Italy), and make a connection over common interests they have with potential hosts (Tamara, 31F, Serbia). In other words, receivers "are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess" (Goffman, 1956, p.10) and, most importantly, that the performer gives performance "for the benefit of other people "(Ibid). This shows that experienced couchsurfers understand the mutual benefit of well-written couch request.

As most participants revealed, they prepare themselves for the performance of requesting a couch, and some prepare even with a script. Aleksandar (42M, Montenegro) spends "5 to 10 minutes writing a single couch request "so he can write it genuinely, sincerely and politely. Bareket-Bojmel et al. (2016) discovered that half of the Facebook users they studied tend to employ self-presentation techniques. It correlates with Lorenzo (26M, Italy), Monika (37F, Germany) and Paulo (28M, Brazil), who admitted having a pre-made draft that they copy-paste from user to user. Monika showed me a document she created and explained what she wrote in it.

"Yes, I developed the document over the years. I can show you the document I made for New York. I should make clear that I read the profile. (…) If there would be a code word like "the tortoise is called Adam", I would say "hello, Jerry, hello Adam" (…) And that would be like the connection section, then there would be something about me and short blog. Why people would like to meet me, why it would be interesting. But also that I'm polite, that I am clean or whatever could be nice. Then I will say something about my trip plans (…) So what is my aim? I want to arise the interest of a person, I want to make it possible for the person to check if it works with what they've planned for these days." – Monika, 37F, Germany

This seems to be one of the self-presentation techniques generated for this feature of Couchsurfing, as it reveals they had prepared themselves on backstage before they entered the front stage performance with an audience to whom they greatly adapt. In a private performance

like this, social media users adapt significantly to their audience, as found in Lowe-Calverley & Grieve's research (2018) on public performances.

Therefore, the couch request feature is a stage where there is initially one performer and one audience member with more power. If the audience agrees with the performance, they become two performative actors. The initial action of the first performers is often well prepared on backstage, and it is adapted each time couchsurfers write a request. However, features like private chats question the validity of audience segregation and context collapse on social media platforms. They suggest a need for a nuanced view of audience segregation on these platforms, as Aspling (2011) has also advised.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Main conclusions

When self-presenting in the profiles, Couchsurfing users disclose their personality in a meaningful way while balancing the disclosure of private personal information; in the private performances of couch requests, users prepare for the performance beforehand so they can reveal information that would be appealing and appropriate to the host. In both performances, the audience is greatly considered.

Expression of personality and meaningfulness go hand in hand with the majority of participants. Personality-building happens through disclosing interests (travelling, meeting new people, art, sports, dancing) that couchsurfers seem to share (Decrop et al., 2018). Couchsurfing serves as a platform in which aspect/s of participants' personality/ies is/are expressed, making their self-presentation style ideal and personality based. Likewise, Couchsurfing operates like a small society in which the platform promotes specific values, such as meaningful exchange (Couchsurfing, 2022), and which members of the society, i.e., performers, illustrate through adherence to meaningful presentation. Meaningfulness saturates users' presentation of personality by revealing interests, motivations and passions that distinguish them from others.

Furthermore, Goffman (1956) states that actors try to convey impressions in their interest. This also seems true for photographs, except acting as another layer of personality presentation,

they reinforce the couchsurfer's adventure and travel identity. Photographs are usually taken in a travel context, mostly with Couchsurfing users alone on the image and less with others. These findings follow Back et al. (2010), who found that social media users show their real personalities on their profiles.

In all aspects of self-presentation, the audience is an important element of consideration, and couchsurfers' perception of the audience flows between the abstract and general imagined audience (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). However, usually, they think of it as similar to them - travel orientated. This result correlates with Lowe-Calverley & Grieve's (2018) findings that social media users greatly consider the audience.

Even though Couchsurfing users share large amounts of personal information, they are still careful in disclosing information they deem too private (e.g. sexual orientation, political views), as Krämer & Schäwel (2020) discovered too. Likewise, participants' answers imply that they think their self-presentation content and concealment of some personal information happen because they wish to satisfy different audiences. Interestingly, there was no difference in the type of content revealed when users were more anonymous, as Jaidka et al. (2022) also found. Some of them hid their real names for anecdotal, practical and security reasons.

Couch requests represent a private performance with a unique goal of finding a host and accommodation. The unique thing about requests is that the host who joins the performance later has more power than the initial performer (Chen, 2018). To achieve the goal, users perform similar performances; they show or openly state they read the host's profile and provide background information not disclosed on their profile and interests. Lastly, they make a connection to a host with potential commonalities. Before the performance is given, users prepare themselves on backstage, allowing them to adapt to the specific audience. During a performance, couchsurfers tend to be rather serious in this situation, which correlates to Goffman's (1956) statement about actors' implicit proposal to take their performances seriously. Therefore, writers adapt to the receiver, which minimizes context collapse and opens the space for audience segregation (Goffman, 1956).

I suggest adapting audience segregation and context collapse concepts because the nature of the Couchsurfing stage and the couch request feature (private chat) does not allow its complete appropriation.

This study contributed to the plethora of social media studies that appropriated Goffman's impression management theory, but with a specific aim of observing impression management and how it is utilized in the Couchsurfing social media platform.

5.2. Limitations

There are a few limitations of the study. This research is hard but not impossible to replicate. Replication of qualitative research is a common critique of the approach (Bryman, 2012). Two sampling strategies that I have used – convenience and purposive sampling – were a reasonable choice for me as a researcher because of the insider's role that I could not escape. It was easy for me to find participants because of my long-time participation in the community and references that made me eligible in the eyes of other couchsurfers, i.e. participants of the research. For other researchers, who are perhaps not community members, it would be more time-consuming to engage with the community so they could understand it properly. Thus, at least in the beginning, trustworthiness would be harder to achieve. It would not be impossible to get similar results, but it would certainly be more challenging.

Furthermore, results represent the specific social media platform – Couchsurfing and cannot be generalized for social media in general, except as a comparative sample to similar exchange hospitality platforms (e.g. BeWelcome, Couchers).

Goffman's theoretical framework limits the social behaviours to either front stage or backstage, leaving no space for nuances in general (Aspling, 2011). Therefore, there is a question if some concepts, such as audience segregation and context collapse, for instance, can be applied correctly to special features of some social media platforms. Regarding the methodological limitations, as stated above, I am an active member of the Couchsurfing community, so I could not have escaped being an insider (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010), which might have caused some bias during the interviews. My intention was always to let the interviewees speak and explain themselves without much interference from my side, except when that was necessary because of the misunderstanding or technical issues that have sometimes arisen in Zoom. Treadwell

(2017) claimed that when interviews are conducted virtually interviewer might miss non-verbal cues that would probably be noticed in a face-to-face setting.

5.3. Future research directions

There are several ways that future research might orient itself. There is certainly space for the extension of this research to (1) the greater number of participants, (2) interviews being conducted face-to-face, and (3) adding the participant observation method or even focus groups to the methods of research. Such expansion would contribute to a better understanding of influential Goffman's self-presentation model in the online environment. Many studies have been done on personality traits and specific social media platforms (Ross et al., 2009; Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Liu et al., 2016). This kind of research would be interesting in the Couchsurfing context. Likewise, as there is a deficiency of research connecting self-presentation to anonymity on social media, researchers should find ways of investigating this phenomenon more closely, perhaps exploring the causes of anonymity, contextualizing it with the wider social media policies or the web in general and how it affects the audience when they cannot connect the social media content to the actual person.

5.4. Practical implications

Regarding the practical implications, this research informs on the importance of media literacy and societal currents. Scholars have been interested in understanding users' behaviour on social media platforms for quite some time (Khan, 2017; Oliveira, 2020). With the growing power of social media platforms over people's everyday lives, a need to develop literacy in using media in a general sense (e.g. news media, social media) has become a challenge and opportunity. Manca et al. (2021) claim that social media literacy is an under-researched area. This research adds to the field of media literacy the importance of appropriately using social media platforms. Otherwise, a user would not be able to participate in the community as intended by the platform's designers and the community that uses it appropriately; therefore, they would not be considered an eligible part of the community, making them marginalized. This research shows what is important to be considered a rightful community member.

Furthermore, this research project presents another layer of a specific societal group and their values and preferences. Decrop et al. (2018) talked about how Couchsurfing impacts the trends in tourism by creating "a sort of parallel economy of sharing" (p.68). This research adds to this picture by showing what members of this "parallel economy" do and what they think others should do if they wish to participate successfully. Couchsurfers that I interviewed, directly and indirectly, revealed that being yourself is the most important, and you will be accepted by presenting yourself in that manner.

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Appendix 1 - Interview excerpt

Interviewer Petar

The first question is, do you verbally agree to everything you have read, the info sheet and you have understood everything you agree to participating verbally?

Monika

Yes.

Interviewer Petar

Okay. So the first questions are just demographic questions, like your nationality.

Monika

My nationality is German.

Interviewer Petar

Your age? I believe in couchsurfing it's not correct haha

Monika

No, no, that's not correct. I am actually thirty seven.

Interviewer Petar

That's interesting for my research.

Monika

I will tell you why I did this.

Interviewer Petar

Gender, female?

Monika

Yeah, yeah. Female.

Interviewer Petar

You wanted to say something?

Monika

I will explain later about the age.

Interviewer Petar

Location?

Monika

Should I say current location? I can say Berlin now but I haven't actively hosted in Berlin. Only hosted in other places. There, I have a housing history that goes back to I think 2008.

Interviewer Petar

Okay, wow, your education is?

Monika

I have a master's degree in geography. I have a diploma in fine arts.

Interviewer Petar

I like geography, at least I liked it back in school, lower ones, elementary and high school. I also went to some tournaments. But then, since there was a need for an upper level of Math, to go for the university. And I pretty much sucked in Math. So I didn't want to go for that.

Monika

That's unfortunate. I mean, it's like other places other like, application, qualifications you have to hand in. And then the end, there's so many different factors that make you either succeed or not.

Interviewer Petar

Yeah. And your current occupation? You said?

Monika

I'm an artist. I work in communication for a steel erection company.

Interviewer Petar

Yeah. Okay, cool. So when did you start using Couchsurfing, was it 2008 or...?

Monika

It was 2008. Yes, correct.

Interviewer Petar

Okay, so until this meeting, you're the person that has...

Monika

I'm not sure maybe I started in 2009. I think like, I created a profile in 2008. After my then roommate told me about it, then I forgot it. Then I went to rave like party in Lyon, and I met someone who turned out to be a couchsurfer and ambassador of Lyon, and then I remember I had a profile too and I was couchsurfing at his place. And then I started hosting and then I was going to France as an Erasmus student, so something like that.

Interviewer Petar

Okay. There was no way back then from that point.

Monika

Yeah, I actually found my accommodation while I lived as an Erasmus student via couchsurfing. It was agreed with my flatmate in Clermont, of course, if there's a request, we will say yes. And this is how we hosted quite a lot of people.

Interviewer Petar

Very cool.

Monika

And then later, I lived for about six years in a very like friendly place for couchsurfing. It was a collective housing with 19 people former squat, blah, blah, that kind of place. And there were always like mattresses and stuff available. So I was also hosting quite a lot there.

Interviewer Petar

In short, what is couchsurfing for you?

Monika

In short, what is couchsurfing? For me, um it's a way to be like, instantly friends, with people on a temporary basis I mean, some friends, some people turned out to be like lifelong friends and my, um, the good mother of the child of a friend whom I met some couchsurfing and one other. Some other people were still like, close friends, but I'm not in contact with most of the people I met here.

Interviewer Petar

Okay, how was your experience to this date?

Monika

My answer was good, and I know that some places can be quite frustrating. So I'm trying to get a couch in New York and I had a couch in New York for next week. And then it was cancelled again, because the House said, Oh, I don't feel like hosting that weekend. So it's not quite equal. And you can feel, it's also something that makes you feel geography if like attractivity, or attraction of places quite well. So some places everybody wants to go some places. Well, of course, you can have the most beautiful culture in the world, but there will be never any requests.

Interviewer Petar

So you said New York?

Monika

Yeah.

Interviewer Petar

And what is your opinion on how people present themselves on couchsurfing?

Monika

How they present themselves? usually the ones who want to present themselves a) as travellers, so many profiles will start I've travelled that many countries. And I like meeting people so they present themselves in a way that can be seen as travellers and also attract trustworthy people. Then there's a certain strand of people who get quite ironical. I think this happens more. After having matured through being couchsurfing for a while and having read like stereotypical profiles, a lot of people will be like, Yeah, I'm wasted every weekend and I don't like people at all. And then yeah, you have some people who get more personal. So you kind of already feel like you get to know them. And then there's also these people who are just like, present themselves in a way that you're like, ah, yeah, that's there. Like in German, we would say choco Latins, I'd like the chocolate perspective okay. But generally, there would be values like creativity, openness, curiosity, that are valued a lot.

Interviewer Petar

Thank you. And now we actually go towards questions that will ask you more about your presentation and your opinion. What were the things you want to express about yourself in the couchsurfing's about me section?

Monika

Oh, I have to look it up again because it's been a while I haven't been

Interviewer Petar

If you need a link...

Monika

I have it, don't worry. In the about me section, I added some disclaimer because I'm not hosting that much anymore. Um, so since I'm in Berlin, I think I had about like 10 requests in the last four weeks but I had to decline because either not being here or not being available. And then yeah, the current mission is being stated. I think I wrote it like six years ago. So that's been a while. The about me, I'm a human being I tried to be more human every day. It's also I think it's been there for about 10 years. So, I think I was there there might be like, older versions of varieties about it, like I'm a geographer or something else and that. As you can see from philosophy um, I think the way like you present yourself will also, at least to my experience, change a lot according to the person you're meeting. So if you're meeting someone from a rural

background and you find out this like common denomination, then I will maybe turn out about rural family or that ex-boyfriend of mine who's still a close friend and who's like a tractor merchant. And if I meet some artists, I would more present me as an artist. So I thought, yeah, I have quite a few facets. And I know I can go in different directions, where I'm just interested in, but I don't necessarily need to put them all there. I think this is what I thought.

Interviewer Petar

Yeah, I saw like you added in the about me in the first part, yeah, that also like disclaimer, current mission about me. And philosophy, right? This is what you added, this is not what couchsurfing

Monika

And philosophy used to be in there. So this is from an older version of. So now, I have to remember the history of couchsurfing profile versions. But the philosophy thing used to be like a standard question. And I think they just didn't put it away. So it didn't go away. If you had it, it was there. And it used to be a quite different still in like 2008, 2010. And people were including, like HTML stuff, and to make it very beautiful. So I did this.

Interviewer Petar

Cool. Okay. So when you were writing this description in about me section, did you consider the audience that was going to read it? Or you solely focused on what you would like to express?

Monika

I focused audience in a way that I thought, okay, like language should be English. Because that's like the broadest common denominator, then. Yeah, I try to be like quite honest about myself. So people will see a little bit like what they can get. But I was definitely also inspired. I mean, through years of couchsurfing, and looking at profiles of many people, I think I got quite a vibe of what I liked another profile, like, not too much about me stuff, but something and I kind of like when the wording is not too generic. So I try to be I think, like, some things where I was aiming for originality and also like shortness. I mean, there used to be like section, or like, older versions that were more lengthy and more detailed, and blah, and then I kind of edited down. Yeah, and I think I think it was a Albania in 2012 and shortly after that, yeah, so I think that the general About Me section and stuff it's basically text that I wrote in 2012 2013 Maybe, and I

haven't been changing a lot since it just like updated the mind so houses section or the my couch section. for the obvious reason I sometimes like moved or like, flatmates were changing.

Interviewer Petar

Yep. Okay.

Monika

Does it make sense to you?

Interviewer Petar

Yeah, it does it does. But we will also like discuss other parts of this is like, I would say now more general. What kind of photographs did you post on your couchsurfing profiles? selfies with friends, for example?

Monika

I usually have photos of me. Not necessary certainly selfies, but like, people someone took of me and I just updated the picture recently before trying to get a couch in New York. So this is the same picture I use in my Tinder profile before. I think I had so I think it's more like every two years I used to like update some pictures and there's one or two pictures with friends

Interviewer Petar

What did you say, sorry, about the tinder?

Monika

It's just the same picture as I have in my Tinder profile. The picture I suppose I look nice and attractive.

Interviewer Petar

On the profile picture, yeah?

Monika

Yes.

Interviewer Petar

That's interesting. Why exactly these photographs?

Monika

Yeah, and it was a picture I thought I looked good. I don't have so many pictures of me. So if I have some picture, I can put it.

Interviewer Petar

What kind of photographs would you never post on your profile?

Monika

Oh, that's a good question. I think pretty sure no nudes. No, like... I have to look what I actually posted. So maybe I will contradict myself. What else? Yeah, even have one picture of me at work, but where I worked as a software trainer. So those are pictures from work.

Interviewer Petar

You do have one? Would you post maybe like family pictures of your family?

Monika

I think I wouldn't too much post pictures that actually show my flatmates all pictures that show like former surfers because usually I only post pictures where I have to public approval that I can post them .Yeah, I never thought about it, but I guess because I so much landed work that you have to pay attention to other people's right let me just do it.

Interviewer Petar

Okay, what do you deem the most important in presentation in couchsurfing? So, this would be in your presentation, but also in other people's presentation that you consider most important? So, what do you pay attention to and when do you think you should also do you if you have also developed then?

Monika

What's most important hm...

Interviewer Petar

this can also like be anything in the profile like, for example references. It can be verification it can be so anything that kind of presents yourself or others.

Monika

I think if I look at couches someplace, our first use the filter has logged in recently. Because what use is there in the most beautiful and promising profile is if it's like not active, then I will have a look if this person might either like have references or if this person has something which like will grab my interest in the wording of self description or the picture. And yeah, I will just see if our interests might match. So I'm not so much into partying and drinking but I like to have interesting conversations. And so I often feel that like if people are also artists or there's other topics I'm interested in like nonviolent communication or like (inaudible) or these kinds of things.

Interviewer Petar

Okay, what in your opinion makes presentation couchsurfing different from presentation on other social media?

Monika

You don't learn about the housing situation with people. I mean, for obvious reasons, but it could be very interesting to learn like, is this a person that has like little room or a person who has like, much room available? The closest I could compare it to is maybe Airbnb. But in Airbnb? Yeah, you don't really want to personally be relate to the hosts. So this it would be more about Yeah, as clean as available, blah, blah, blah. But on couchsurfing, it would be more Yeah, like, oh, yeah, I like to show around or what is also specific, some people develop quite interesting mechanisms how to deal with a freeloader problem. So saying, Okay, if you want to surf my couch, please make sure that you will include the world plump pudding, putting out whatever and then it's somewhere hidden like or somewhere or it's already in the disclaimer. And then you have like this split between presenting themselves very open, very hospital and all that. And it's the same time like, sometimes you read a profile, and I have the image of like, fortress. And I can see along his, or at least, this gives me the idea of a long history of like, disappointing encounters of people not showing up or people will, having sex in the couch in the living room, or vomiting in the main vase or whatever. Staff you can imagine have unpleasant experiences.

Interviewer Petar

Okay, thank you. What would you say how rich is the description of yourself? And would you say you could be identified with this presentation like from your family, closest friends or whoever?

Monika

I don't know. I think it's a little bit generic. I mean, I think my best friends would recognise me by in the sharing sections like how to dye your hair writing poems and computer stuff, then something about art project I did. But to be honest, to be like, an average reader is something that happens to many people in couchsurfing. I think my tastes and music is not very original, or tastes and films. Yeah, and to be like an open person. Though I think that's also quite generic, actually. I mean, it's nice, but it's like nothing very special. Yeah, maybe about like, my artistic interests, like flux, fluxes, performance, art, that kind of things.

Interviewer Petar

And have you ever purposely not presented some specific information about you? If so, why is that? So this is a question about your age, I guess. And the things that you might not disclose?

Monika

Yeah. Yeah. About the age there was, I think it was in 2012. around, you have to look at like, the number, the development of membership numbers. It was one point where there was about 1 million people on couchsurfing. And it changes the character. Like, suddenly I get like, lots of dating, like requests in 2012, something like that. Yeah. I have to think I think it was 2012 or 2013. Maybe. And then I just like, switch the digits of my age. So I think it was 2012 was 28. And then I made it 82. Okay.

Interviewer Petar

All right. Interesting. Did it stop after?

Monika

Yes, yes, it was successful. I mean, people usually just look for people in their 20s like girls in their 20s and then it was very easy.

Interviewer Petar

Is there anything else? Besides age?

Monika

I could be more precise about my studies. I think. I didn't say where I come from.

Interviewer Petar

Yeah. What is it called? Yeah, I saw that.

Monika

Yeah, I think I could have said (inaudible) but yeah, it's some small town in Germany. I could have like, said, I speak more languages. Well, I used to say I spoke four languages. But I kind of forgot most of them. So now it's accurate.

Interviewer Petar

Okay. And did you delete anything after having some negative experience with someone because, you know, I know like with these tricky topics, religion, philosophy, politics, no.

Monika

No, not that I remember it. So, I think there was nothing that bad that I had such a problem that I now remember. I still remember it.

Interviewer Petar

Okay. And did you did you think that you might have written too much or too little description of yourself or think it was just enough?

Monika

I don't know. Yeah, I couldn't write more. I could summarise it more. I don't know. I think I've just too lazy as I told you. I haven't like so much updated. I mean, I included some of the studies that they did or what I finished but I think the main body of my couchsurfing presentation was like established in 2010, 2012, just details.

Interviewer Petar

Okay. And then like when you were when you were presenting yourself back then was your aim, like to give a full comprehensive picture of yourself description of yourself or you want to select certain information depending on how you assess this information.

Monika

I don't remember anymore. I mean, I'm totally aware that you can never give like a full explanation of everything and just not help. I think it just generally wanted to say, I'm a nice person could be interesting to meet me.

Interviewer Petar

But I suppose it will be more towards that you'd like that certain information because you said like, you didn't talk about your studies, or languages. And yeah, I know something.

Monika

I'm contradicting myself, beautiful. Yeah, I think in a while was not so comfortable about my studies, because it was not progressing so well. Which was also related to travelling too much. And doing other stuff. And then later, I mean, when I just had finished all that stuff, it's also like, okay, but I don't want to intimidate people neither.

Interviewer Petar

Uh huh.

Monika

So I think three languages is also enough. Okay.

Interviewer Petar

And have you ever considered hiding some information in your profile? So that so that you are sure others have read your profile?

Monika

No, I'm too lazy for these kinds of things. You mean like...

Interviewer Petar

Many hosts would do this having for example…

Monika

Actually I have some. Yeah, I used my real name in short. Okay. Yeah. Yeah, it used to be different, but it was not practical. So I just changed it to my real name.

Interviewer Petar

Okay. This is actually the next question. So we can discuss this next one. For example, I think many people who host, they would hide some information because they really want to be sure that others have read and this is like what the password you were talking about? Things like this. You say no.

Monika

So far. I didn't do it on purpose. Okay. I mean, I was living in Munster. So not so many couchsurfers you don't need to filter that much. And, yeah, okay, I can still like say, if I have the feeling I wouldn't get along with a person or I would be. It wouldn't be nice. Now. I could say, oh, I'm not available. So I don't need to put it. Maybe when it gets too busy in Berlin, I might do it. But I think it's also I don't like the attitude too much. You're making it difficult for like new people to this. And also, if you're like, I mean, these days you have cell phone and apps and blah But I remember these days when you just take hanging in a very shitty internet cafe and trying to find a couch and you know every hour you were spending in front of the screen costs lots of money. And then like reading through roughly through all profiles and finding that the turtle was called Jimmy.

Interviewer Petar

Yeah. Interesting answer. Have you ever did you ever use this pseudonym? Or a fake name? If not, did you consider that so you did for some time?

Monika

He had I think it was just the vibe back then. I think the early days of internet you don't use your real name. So I had this name (inaudible) (HER NAME) (?), which is still my profile name. I don't remember when I changed it to my real name.

Interviewer Petar

Too long ago. Okay, so in the beginning, yeah. And have you ever used photographs that do not strictly represent you or show you? I believe not. From what I see.

Monika

Me neither. No. Okay.

Interviewer Petar

Have you ever thought about the privacy settings on couchsurfing, did you ever change something in these settings?

Monika

I guess I did. But I don't remember. Kind of I went through it a while ago, decided, Oh, this is how I will want it. And then I've been long ago on couch, so long on couchsurfing. I could say just my surname interesting. I actually choose to show profile only to members.

Interviewer Petar

Yeah, yeah. And what do you think about verification system? Would you get verified? If you are not? Why you are verified? So what is your opinion on verification? Some people told me they're not bothered by this, like if others are verified, and if they're going to host them. So what do you think about?

Monika

I don't know. I think back in the day, I used I thought it might be useful to verify, to be more trustworthy to people that they could actually believe my address was real. But no, I don't know.

Interviewer Petar

Yeah, but you are verified now?

Monika

Yeah, I mean, back in the day, I thought it would be nice for other people that they could sing, okay, their dress is real. Like, there's some aspect of reality, and I could trust this person. Since I was like more of a host than a surfer. I thought could be good for people.

Interviewer Petar

Okay, so basically you did it for others? And did you bought life membership? Not because you said the like you bought it before? You don't renew it every year? Or?

Monika

Oh, I think I have to renew it now every year. It's a friend asked me week, some time ago. And I was like, I don't know.

Interviewer Petar

What in your opinion makes a person a relevant user of the platform? Like what are the factors that for you make the other couchsurfing user, someone who would appreciate in this couchsurfing spirit sense?

Monika

If I could see that the person has been posting and being surfing. I mean, this discussion is already a nuanced one, because actually, it's also speaks about privilege in a way. Like not everybody's actually always able to host if you're living with your parents in a small place, et cetera. Yeah. So and also, if this person has surfed and you can read like, nice references, like, I don't know, people had meaningful encounters with this person. And I think this is what couchsurfing is about, about creating opportunities for meaningful encounters. But then there's something else I think learning or sometimes reading profiles of people was just very inspirational for me. So there was one that I remember it was like, in my life, I went through great highs and to very high and very low something like that. And all this made me the person I am and it doesn't matter so much. Maybe we can have coffee something like that. So this piece, these bits and pieces of language that kind of resonate with me. Okay, yeah. Also seeing what other people do in life, for example, what kind of jobs people have that makes them travel and have an interesting life or what kind of political activities they do.

Interviewer Petar

Okay, thank you. And then actually now we come to the last section of questions, which is about couch requests, which you have sent. And I have a pre-question, if you read the info sheet, I'm also aiming to, to look at how people have crafted couch requests, which they sent to others. Because I'm quite sure this would be a novel data that nobody really explored. So are you willing to share a few of these couch requests, just the message itself? I don't need to know anything else. For me, I will just like look at elements and some patterns that I could find among like people who have written.

Monika

I could show you a little bit how I crafted actually. I have to see…

Interviewer Petar

You could share the screen with me.

Monika

To explain you how you can how I write a couchsurfing request.

Interviewer Petar

Yeah, this is my next question.

Monika

Yeah, but I can have a look at my. Hi, yeah, there's couchsurfing. Yeah, I kind of have a look in my sandbox and send you some examples.

Interviewer Petar

Sure. Thank you very much. So if you want now, I can ask you like when you requested couches, so you were probably careful in how you crafted a request.

Monika

Yes, if I have time, and it developed over the years, I can now show you my document I made for New York.

Interviewer Petar

Do you want to share the screen? Is that? Yes.

Monika

So you will see like, number, name of person, link what I like about this person, how we'll start like, what could be good for connecting? And then this is like the structure. So it's like, what I like about this person. But when I will come what are my plans in New York? This is my About Me section, which is a little bit funny. Also, then trip plans. And then there's a disclaimer for COVID.

Interviewer Petar

This is interesting, actually, like, so you basically made a Word document where you prepare yourself on how to craft the message couch request message. Am I getting it correct? Yes. Okay, wow, this is really interesting. I never ever heard of this. And they think I don't know if there are even research on this. So think there is no and this is quite interesting.

Monika

I only followed the research on couchsurfing. I in think 2014 because I wanted to read my master's thesis on it, but then did something else.

Interviewer Petar

Okay, cool, cool. Like, way through, what should I ask now, since you have this document, I mean, you could share a couple of messages. But you could now in this question, explain actually, in short, like that you did this just so I have like an audio version. And my question is like, what are the elements you consider important for a writing request? And I guess you in this you could explain how you did it and what you consider important.

Monika

Okay, so I should share screen again?

Interviewer Petar

You don't need to, this is just like for me to have a word or verbal recording.

Monika

Yes. So what I consider important is, I should make sure clear that I read the profile. And I should start with this. So if there would be a code word like the tortuoise was called Adam and I would say hello, Jerry. Hello Adam. The tortuoise and then I like your profile. It's really interesting how you water your garden or that you have potluck parties every Friday. And that would be like the connection section, then there would be something about me and short blog. So why people would like to meet me why it would be interesting. But also that I'm polite, that can clean or whatever could be nice. Then I will say, say something about my trip plans, like I'm on a business trip. But I'm also an artist, I will go to museums. And I will share my dates. And then if it's a busy city, I will also say, yeah, it's I know, it's a busy city, and I can understand if you're busy, but I would be so happy if you could host me. So these would be my general things. And now with COVID. I also added a COVID section telling you about my vaccination status and stuff. So what is my aim? Was this, I want to arise the interest of a person, I want to make it possible for the person to check if it works with what they've planned for these days. And yeah, I think that's it.

Interviewer Petar

Okay, and how successful were they were, then these requests do you feel like they were very successful, like almost every couch request was accepted? Or maybe it was not, simply because people couldn't host you or because they had some plans changed in the US, in last moments.

Monika

It depends. There used to be times where it was easy, easier to be successful.

Interviewer Petar

Like, yeah, do you feel this?

Monika

Seven years ago and was more easy in general? It was before COVID, it was more easy. And it was. And it also depends if it's a busy city, like New York is more complicated. If it's a small city, it's more easy. And yeah, this is maybe what I can say about it. So I'm still with this, like method. And not not 100% successful. And I know that there are factors like people actually don't actively use their profiles, then I usually or I tend to write to people like my presumed age range. So like, more to people or at least 25 or older. And then people start having jobs kids, the whole package elderly. So no, I'm not very successful. I'm not 100% successful all the time.

Interviewer Petar

Okay, cool. So this was the last official question. I just like, a question like, do you have anything else you want to add related to this topic? Something I didn't maybe ask.

Monika

I think you have enough data.

Interviewer Petar

I agree. There have any questions about the study?

Monika

Yes, I do have so you use like qualitative interviews with people. And so how many people do you interview?

Interviewer Petar

12 people.

Monika

Twelve, okay, yeah, that's doable. Maybe there's something to add. I think what is very specific about this network, compared to other networks is that if you're crafting a coach request, you're asking someone to give you something for free. And that's, I mean, there's some situations where this exists. But this makes a situation where it's can be scary, can be counter intuitive, like, I don't know, this person that I want to serve its couch. I mean, it used to be very much straightforward. And if you've done this for a while, it can be also very empowering. Likewise to hitchhiking. Which you could consider comparing but studying hitchhiking is, is maybe a little bit more difficult. I mean, I can tell you also lots of things about like, how to hitchhike how to ask people where, how and so on.

Appendix 2. – Information sheet

UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG

Presentation of Couchsurfing users

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether to take part.

Who am I, and what is this study about?

My name is Petar Brković, and I am a Master in Communication programme student at the University of Gothenburg. I am currently doing a research project for my Master's thesis on how Couchsurfing users present themselves on the platform. The study aims to explore, through interviews and user profile analysis, how Couchsurfing users present themselves on the platform.

Therefore, I am looking for people who have experience using the Couchsurfing platform, either by hosting, surfing, or just meeting people.

What will taking part involve?

Being involved in this research implies doing an online interview (around 30 minutes over Zoom) with the researcher and acceptance of the analysis of your profile on Couchsurfing. In the interview, I will be interested in several topics:

- how you view your presentation on the Couchsurfing (About me section, photographs)
- how accurate you believe your presentation is

- have you ever hidden or considered hiding some information (real name, photograph, age, location)

- what does verification mean to you

- how do you approach couch requests

- your opinion on the presentation in the Couchsurfing.

Likewise, by being involved, you accept being recorded over the Zoom communication channel during the interview.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You have the valuable experience you have developed over the years in using the Couchsurfing platform and because you understand the platform's philosophy.

Do you have to take part?

Participating in the research is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to refuse the participation, refuse any question and withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever.

What are the possible risks and benefits of taking part?

There are a few benefits of taking part in the research. You might better understand how you present yourself in Couchsurfing and how you think of your presentation in a social media setting in general. Likewise, by participating in the research, you are helping social media research expand knowledge on self-presentation in a specific social media platform.

However, since I am researching a personal topic of how users of Couchsurfing present themselves, this implies that you as a participant might be exposed to questions that you have not considered before and which, therefore, ask you to look at your own social media acts introspectively. For some, this might cause discomfort.

Will taking part be confidential?

Yes, it will.

First, if you accept participating in the research, I will send you an informed consent document that you will carefully read, tick boxes, and eventually sign. This document will confirm that you understand what participating in this research implies and how the data you provide will be confidential. When the informed consent form is signed, I will ask you for verbal consent that you have understood everything and that you have signed the document.

All the participants who participate in the research will be given pseudonyms (fake names) with no obvious similarity to their real names. I can hide your age, location, and other demographic information if that is what you prefer.

This will confirm that any obtained data is confidential.

Non-anonymised data in signed consent forms and audio recordings are collected and retained as part of the research process.

How will the information you provide be recorded, stored, and protected?

The interview will be recorded and stored in a folder on my computer. No one has access to my computer, and no one knows the password for my laptop.

What will happen to the results of the study?

My plans for the research only consist in submitting my dissertation.

Who should you contact for any further information?

You can contact me, Petar Brković, on my official student e-mail: gusbrkpe@student.gu.se

Thank you!

Appendix 3 – Call for participants

UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG

Call for Participants: Self-presentation in Couchsurfing

Hello,

My name is Petar Brković, and I am a Master in Communication programme student at the University of Gothenburg. I am currently doing a research project for my Master's thesis on **Self-presentation in Couchsurfing**. Therefore, I am looking for people who have experience using the Couchsurfing platform, either by hosting, surfing, or just meeting people.

The research objective is to explore how Couchsurfing users present themselves on the platform. This implies conducting an interview (around 30 minutes long) over Zoom in which the participants will try to give a picture of how and why they present in the way they do. Likewise, I aim to carry out user profile analysis, meaning that I am interested in analysing your profile: About me section, couch request message that you have sent to others, and photographs. This is all scheduled to happen throughout March and early April 2022.

As I understand that some of these features are private, I will explain why I consider them essential to my research aim. The highest ethical standards recommended in social media research will be respected, meaning that all the information provided by you and others will be anonymised using pseudonyms, and it will be confidential.

If you would like to participate, please, get back to me as soon as possible: **gusbrkpe@student.gu.se.**

My Couchsurfing profile: https://www.couchsurfing.com/people/petar-brkovic-1

My LinkedIn profile: https://www.linkedin.com/in/petar-brkovi%C4%87-48a29b15b/

Many Thanks,

Petar Brković
gusbrkpe@student.gu.se
Student of Master in Communication,
Department of Applied IT,
University of Gothenburg

Appendix 4 – Informed consent

UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG

Consent to take part in the research project on the topic of Self-presentation in Couchsurfing

Purpose of Study:

The study aims to explore, through interviews and user profile analysis, how Couchsurfing users present themselves on the platform.

Therefore, I am looking for people who have experience using the Couchsurfing platform, either by hosting, surfing, or just meeting people.

Please write your name initials in each box, if you agree with the statement (e.g. PB)

Being involved in this research implies doing an online interview (around 30 minutes over Zoom) with the researcher and acceptance of the analysis of your profile on Couchsurfing. In the interview, I will be interested in several topics:

- how you view your presentation on the Couchsurfing (About me section, photographs)
- how accurate you believe your presentation is

- have you ever hidden or considered hiding some information (real name, photograph, age, location)
- what does verification mean to you
- how do you approach couch requests
- your opinion on the presentation in the Couchsurfing.

All the participants who participate in the research will be given pseudonyms (fake names) with no obvious similarity to their real names. I could hide their age, location, and other demographic information if participants prefer.

This will confirm that any obtained data is confidential and anonymised.

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point without giving any reason.

I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand that I will (not) be identifiable from any publications or presentations, videos, websites, or other media outlets.

I consent to being audio/video recorded.

I understand how audio recordings/videos will be used in research outputs.

Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option):

    a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or**
    b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable. **or**
    c) I agree to the use of direct quotations in research outputs.

I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

I agree to take part.

I agree that my personal contact details can be retained in a secure
database so that the researchers can contact me about future studies.

_____   dd / mm / yyyy

                        _____

(the first line on the left is for the participant's full name, the second line at the bottom is for the
signature with participant's initials. The line on the right is the date when they have consented to
participate in the research.)

Appendix 5 – Interview guide

Initial/demographic questions:

1. Nationality

2. Age

3. Gender

4. Location

5. Education

6. Occupation

1. **Ice breakers (examples, will be different depending on the interview):**

- When did you start using Couchsurfing?
- What is Couchsurfing for you?
- How was your experience to this date?
- What is your opinion on how people present themselves on Couchsurfing?

2. **Crafting the About me section**

- What were the things you wanted to express about yourself in the CS' About me section?

- In the process of writing the description text in About me section, did you consider the

  audience that was going to read that, or you solely focus on what you would like to

express?

2.1 Photographs:

- What kinds of photographs did you post on your Couchsurfing profile (selfies, nudity, family photo, kids) ? Why exactly these photographs?
- What kinds of photographs would you never post on your Couchsurfing profile?

3. **CouchSurfing platform:**

- What do you deem most important in the presentation in Couchsurfing?
- What, in your opinion, makes presentation in Couchsurfing different from presentation on other social media platforms?

4. **Accurate self-presentation of the online self:**

- What would you say, how rich is the description of yourself?
- Have you ever purposely not presented some specific information about you? If so, why is that? Or maybe deleted something after negative experience?
- Have you hide or have considered hiding some information on your profile so that you are sure others have read your profile?

5. **Anonymity**

- Did you ever use a pseudonym on a Couchsurfing? If not, did you consider that?
- Have you ever used photographs that do not strictly show you? Avatars, cartoons, paintings…

6. **Privacy/verification/relevant user**

- Have you ever thought about your privacy settings on Couchsurfing and did you ever change something in these settings?
- What do you think about verification system? Would you get verified (if you are not) and why?

- What in your opinion, makes a person a relevant user of the platform? Like what are the factors (features of the platform, verification, confirmation, specific info) that make the person someone you would appreciate in this CS spirit sense

7. Couch request questions

- When you requested couches, were you careful in how you crafted the request?
- What are the elements you consider important when writing a request?

8. Closing questions

- Do you have anything else to add related to this topic, maybe something I didn't ask you about?
- Do you have any questions about the study?