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THE SOCIAL NATURE AND OUTCOME OF THE INTERACTIONS IN A NON-MONETARY CENTRED SHARING ECONOMY: FROM A SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY PERSPECTIVE

by

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A thesis submitted to the

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University of the Witwatersrand

In fulfilment of the requirements

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Under the supervision of Professor Fiona Donald and Professor Andrew Thatcher

August 2021

Declaration

I declare that this thesis, titled “The social nature and outcome of the interactions in a non-monetary centred sharing economy: from a social exchange theory perspective” is an original and authentic piece of work written by me, Stephano Radaelli, and adheres to the University of the Witwatersrand’s policy on plagiarism. A full signed statement of declaration is included in Annexure 12: Declaration of Originality of Work (see p.278).

Full Name: Stephano Radaelli

Date: 15 August 2021

Signature:



Abstract

The sharing economy is a collective name for emerging platforms that are bringing strangers together and changing the landscape of consumption. Individuals have been using these sharing economy platforms as an alternative to traditional trade to exchange resources. This study refined to the context of a non-monetary form of the sharing economy, namely Couchsurfing, where the reliance on social relationships were expected to be more prevalent. The social relationships between peers during an exchange offered an opportunity to find applicability and relevancy for social exchange theory. This study aimed to clarify the social nature of the interaction in Couchsurfing and determine the outcomes from these Couchsurfing interactions.

Using a phenomenological research design, 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted together with an immersive experience as an active participant of the chosen sharing economy platform, Couchsurfing. Couchsurfing is a sharing economy platform that enables travellers to stay with other members for free. The positionality of the researcher was from an insider perspective studying other insiders. The data collected was analysed using a thematic analysis approach.

Social exchange theory was supported in finding that the social nature of the interaction in Couchsurfing was reciprocal. The reciprocal exchange was clarified as co-created, continuous and dynamic. Individuals revealed that there was a necessity for a reciprocal response directly from the recipient. The findings confirmed that Couchsurfers had unspoken and explicitly stated expectations of a reciprocal relationship which impacted the continuity of the exchange after the Couchsurfing experience. This study also identified different social benefits that individuals gained from their Couchsurfing interactions. Throughout, these

research findings espoused and expanded on previous contributions to the theoretical framework. The presence of generosity during the reciprocal exchange has challenged the theoretical premise that individuals wanted to maximise their gains. Further research into generosity during the reciprocal exchange has been recommended.

Keywords: Sharing economy, social exchange, social exchange theory, hospitality, Couchsurfing, reciprocal, reciprocity, reciprocal exchange, social interactions, benefits of the exchange

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Problem

The sharing economy has remained distinguishable from the traditional economy because people unknown to each other have been coming together to exchange resources in a self-regulated, responsible and sustainable way (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015). As an active participant in the sharing economy prior to commencing this study, the phenomenon of strangers coming together and exchanging resources in a self-regulated manner intrigued the researcher to pursue an understanding of these behaviours in view of a specific theoretical lens from psychology. This was not the only reason for the consideration of this study. The original allure of the sharing economy that brought strangers together to share and exchange resources with each other in a self-regulated manner has been at risk of being disrupted (Rinne, 2019). Rapid growth and the enforcement of regulations have contributed to some sharing economy communities replacing these natural, self-regulated social relationships with formalised contractual relationships (Frenken & Schor, 2017; Hossain, 2020). The replacement of these social relationships into commoditised contractual agreements risks the sharing economy losing its socially responsible, self-regulated foundations and becoming indistinguishable from the traditional economy (Balaram, 2016; Rinne, 2019).

This study sought to explore the social relationships that emerged between individuals when they used these sharing economy platforms to exchange resources. These social relationships needed to be studied in an environment where community members relied more on the social activities available to them in this environment than on the commercial benefits available to them (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Lynch, Molz, Mcintosh, Lugosi, & Lashley, 2011). There is a sub-classification of the sharing economy that has been noted for these social

activities among peer groups as opposed to the commercial exchange. These sharing economy platforms became known as the non-monetary sharing economy (Gollnhofer, Hellwig & Morhart, 2016; Gyimóthy & Dredge, 2017; Hardy, 2017; Mittendorf, 2017). Non-monetary does not mean that these platforms do not have a monetary benefit for its users, like offering users *free access* to goods, but rather the main form of the exchange is not about using money to gain access to goods or services (Mittendorf, 2017). It is this non-monetary sharing economy context that offered an environment for the basis of this study to understand social interactions and the exchanges that form when individuals have come together.

There were two points of departure for this current research study. The first was that there has been limited clarity around the social nature of the interactions in a non-monetary, peer-to-peer sharing economy. It is important to note that the term **social nature of the interaction** was used to refer to a more encompassing exploration of the social behaviour of the relationship under study. Aspects of the social nature of the interaction was about how the relationship developed between individuals when the social exchange became altruistic (Belk, 2010; Belk, 2014a; Belk, 2014b; Price & Belk, 2016), mutually beneficial (Belk, 2014b; Blau, 1964; Botsman & Roger, 2010; Ekeh, 1974) or manipulative for either of the individuals in the interaction (Blau, 1964; Brotherton & Wood, 2007; Burgess, 1982; Molm, 2010). This is especially important in the midst of empirical support indicating towards the social behaviour being reciprocal in nature and involving expectations of favours being returned (e.g. Davlembayeva, Papagiannidis, & Alamanos, 2019; Geiger, Horbel & Germelmann, 2018; Habibi, Kim & Laroche, 2016; Harvey, Smith & Golightly, 2014). Secondly, to bring focus to the social behaviour and the continued participation in the non-monetary sector of the sharing

economy, it was essential to understand the social benefits that individuals have sought within these environments.

1.2. Studies That Have Addressed This Problem and Their Limitations

The social behaviour in the sharing economy was originally conceptualised as sharing (Belk, 2010, 2014a) or collaboration (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). There was limited empirical research that was used to inform these conceptual definitions. Instead, the term sharing was associated to Sahlins' (1972) articulation of an altruistic act of giving. While the term collaboration was borrowed from a "groundswell" of information that Botsman and Rogers (2010, p.XV) "stumbled" upon. Collaboration came to be interpreted as an unnegotiated, coordinated effort to balance out resources between individuals (Belk, 2014b). These conceptual articulations summarising the essence of the sharing economy continued to inform further non-empirically based conclusions about the social behaviour found in the sharing economy (e.g. Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015; Kramer, 2016; Matofska, 2014; Owyang & Samuel, 2015; Rinne et al., 2013; Schor, 2016).

Once empirical research began to explore and explain the behaviour found in the sharing economy, not enough consideration had been given to the social interactions, which formed between individuals participating in the sharing economy (e.g. Chudzian, 2015; Constable, 2017; Grybaitė & Stankevičienė, 2016; Hamari, Ukkonen & Sjóklint, 2016; Hellwig, Morhart, Girardin & Hauser, 2015; Hwang, & Griffiths, 2017; Piscicelli, Cooper & Fisher, 2015). At the time of commencing this research study, there were a few preceding studies that had been interested in the nature of the interaction (e.g. Benoit, Baker, Bolton, Gruber & Kandampully, 2017; Harvey et al., 2014). Those studies interested in the nature of the interaction had found that individuals were coming together to give access to resources in exchange for other resources. The limitation

with these studies was that they were only interested in the commercial tenets of the exchange without trying to understand the social dynamics of what collaboration entailed.

Additional research around the social behaviour in the sharing economy revealed that people have been motivated by the benefits available to them in these environments (Benoit et al., 2017; Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Hamari et al., 2016; Hawlitschek et al., 2018; Hellwig et al., 2015; Kramer, 2016; Lawson, Gleim, Perren & Hwang, 2016; Möhlmann, 2015; Kim, Woo & Nam, 2018; Ma, Seydel, Zhang & Dang, 2019; Mahadevon, 2018; Sordi, Perin, Petrini & Sampaio, 2018; Zalega, 2018). These studies were arriving at the same conclusions. Individuals participating in the sharing economy have been drawn to the monetary benefits available in these contexts. As a result, the social benefits in the sharing economy were often downplayed and accepted as a given (e.g. Schor, 2017). Regardless, individuals have also been drawn to the social benefits that were available to those who participated in the sharing economy (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Benoit et al., 2017; Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Chudzian, 2015; Fraanje & Spaargaren, 2019; Hawlitschek, Teubner & Gimpel, 2018; Palgan, Zvolska & Mont, 2017; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020; Schaffner, Georgi & Federspiel, 2018; Wang, Xiang, Yang & Ma, 2019). The only problem was that these social benefits were shown to be less attractive than the commercial benefits available (Hamari et al., 2016; Hawlitschek et al., 2018; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018).

These conclusions, where the commercial benefits outweighed the social benefits, could be challenged because the exchange between individuals was not entirely socially based. Relationships that have been reliant on a commercial exchange have needed to exhibit commercial benefits (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Similarly, contexts that have been reliant on social interactions as the primary form of exchange have worked out better because the

benefits were social (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The non-monetary sharing economy has been recognised as the preferred context to understand social behaviour in the sharing economy because there has been more reliance on social interactions between those participating (Gollnhofer et al., 2016; Gyimóthy & Dredge, 2017; Hardy, 2017; Mittendorf, 2017; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020).

For this current study, Couchsurfing was selected as the platform from which to explore the dynamics of these social interactions for two reasons. The first reason was that Couchsurfing has been classified as a popular non-monetary sharing economy platform (Hardy, 2017; Mittendorf, 2017). This meant that this platform should be an ideal context to study the social interaction even though there could be monetary benefits because Couchsurfing hosts provide *free* accommodation to others in the community. Another benefit of the Couchsurfing environment in this non-monetary context is that members of this community, also known as Couchsurfers, spend time together face-to-face and likely to enhance the social interaction. This is unlike many other non-monetary sharing economy platforms that are digitally based, such as knowledge sharing platforms (e.g. Okyere-Kwakye & Nor, 2011; Tsai & Kang, 2019; Yan, Wang, Chen & Zhang, 2016), where the exchange is present but the opportunity for the social relationship to develop could be diminished.

The second reason for selecting Couchsurfing was because of prior experience that the researcher had as a member of the community since 2011. The researcher was intrigued by the people that he met on CouchSurfing. Initially, the researcher perceived this platform to be a cheap form of accommodation for people really stuck on a very tight budget while travelling. However, after having fulfilled the role as both host and guest in the community, the researcher came to realise that there was a unique social dynamic at play between members. People,

previously unknown to each other, came together to socialise, share in experiences (for example, go out for a meal and drinks), and engage in conversation where both individuals had something to learn from each other. This social relationship was worth exploring further to understand what drove people to share and collaborate in this way.

These views by the researcher were corroborated by other research contributions that gave insight into the sociability that happens among Couchsurfers when interacting face-to-face (Parigi, State, Dakhlallah, Corten & Cook, 2013; Parigi & State, 2014; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). Besides the exchange of commodities in the Couchsurfing environment (e.g. Harvey et al., 2014; Palgan et al., 2017), there has been evidence leading towards clarifying the exchange as being reciprocal and mutually beneficial (Davlembayeva et al., 2019; Davlembayeva, Papagiannidis & Alamanos, 2020; Geiger et al., 2018; Priporas, Stylos, Rahimi & Vedanthachari, 2017; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020).

Concentrating on trying to understand the social relationship present in Couchsurfing, the researcher looked to social exchange theory to provide perspective. For purposes of this current study, the choice for social exchange theory was threefold. First, social exchange theory has elaborated on the reciprocal exchange that happens when individuals have previously come together to interact with each other (Blau, 1964; Ekeh, 1974; Molm, 1990, Stafford, 2008; Molm, 2010; Li, 2015). This theoretical framework, which describes the social behaviour as reciprocal, has not meant that it refutes claims of collaboration or a balancing out of resources within a social exchange. Instead, reciprocity involves two or more individuals relying on each other to fulfil on the exchange in a supportive manner (Cook & Yamagishi, 1992; Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels & Hall, 2017); although, not all exchanges end up being supportive and reciprocal. This reliance on each other has not always worked out because someone in the relationship has sought

to manipulate the other into giving back (Molm, 2010). For now, Couchsurfing interactions have appeared to align with a collaborative, supportive way of reciprocating (e.g. Geiger et al., 2018). Further clarity is still required around the potential dependencies that could exist during the reciprocal exchange in Couchsurfing and the impact that it had on the collaborative style of reciprocating.

Second, an exchange between two or more individuals has involved expectations of a future return but these expectations have not always been specified or communicated upfront (Blau, 1964). Early proponents of the sharing economy disputed that individuals should have expectations of any future return (Belk, 2010, 2014a, 2014b). Since then, it has become apparent that Couchsurfers do have expectations that their exchange partners would return a favour (Geiger et al., 2018). It was not evident whether these expectations were always unspecified and what would happen when these expectations were made more explicit. Blau (1964) stated that when expectations were negotiated or communicated ahead of the interaction, this would limit the opportunity for the interaction to become reciprocal. Therefore, there was an opportunity to explore the efforts that Couchsurfers took to ensure that the exchange was reciprocal.

Third, individuals have been motivated to participate in an exchange because of the potential rewards available to them (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). In view of the social nature of these interactions in Couchsurfing, it was anticipated that the rewards should be socially based as well (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). There has been more nuanced evidence of the different social benefits available to those engaging with others because of these non-monetary platforms. Some of these social benefits have included a sense of belonging (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017), strong social bonds between interacting parties (Fraanje & Spaargaren, 2019), and the opportunity to meet new people (Grybaitė & Stankevičienė, 2016). Couchsurfing has

also been an environment where those participating in the exchange have benefitted from having formed friendships as a result of the strong social bonds that developed during the Couchsurfing experience (Geiger et al., 2018; Parigi et al., 2013; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020).

The challenge with social settings, like Couchsurfing, has been around how those participating in the social exchange have also sought to reduce the costs of the exchange in order to maximise their returns (Homans, 1958, 1961). The potential insight into this could be found in the continuity of the reciprocal exchange. People have continued the reciprocal exchange for as long as both exchange partners continued to experience gains from the exchange (Homans, 1974). Therefore, if the reciprocal exchange was ongoing in Couchsurfing, this could give insight into how Couchsurfers were maximising their gains from the social benefits.

1.3. Significance of the Study

The main focus and contribution of this study was to explore whether social exchange theory and many of the suppositions of this theory have remained relevant in view of a real-world community, namely a non-monetary sharing economy platform called Couchsurfing. At the time of going into fieldwork, early contributions and the application of social exchange theory were initially limited to the exploration and explanation of digital social interactions on knowledge sharing platforms, such as researchgate.net (Okyere-Kwakye & Nor, 2011; Yan, Wang, Chen & Zhang, 2016; Tsai & Kang, 2019). These studies affirmed the reciprocal position of social exchange theory because the exchange was motivated by a gain (in the form of information and knowledge-based material) that was available to both exchange partners.

More support for social exchange theory came to light through the exploration of social relationships in Couchsurfing and other non-monetary sharing economy platforms

(Davlembayeva et al., 2019; Davlembayeva et al., 2020; Geiger et al., 2018; Priporas et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2019; Tsai & Kang, 2019; Wang et al., 2019). Across these studies, there was support for social exchange theory because of the impact that reciprocity had on the outcomes of the interaction – and how individuals benefitted from reciprocating on these platforms. The applicability of social exchange theory in the context of this current study has continued from where former studies in the non-monetary sharing economy left off.

There is continued evidence that the social interactions in Couchsurfing have been collaborative and supportive (Geiger et al., 2018; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). These former findings from Couchsurfing continue to be the cornerstone from where social exchange theory could be limited when offering support towards a balanced, supportive relationship. Reciprocal relationships, according to social exchange theory, have been underpinned by a power imbalance (Blau, 1964; Molm, 2010). Both people in the relationship would be motivated by their own individual gains available in the social exchange. It has been unclear how far Couchsurfers would go to ensure their relationships with each other remained supportive and beneficial when their pursuits differed. These findings have the potential to support or challenge social exchange theory depending on the potential outcomes of the relationship.

There were two other areas where this study remained relevant. The first of these two additional contributions were to add to the existing body of knowledge around benefits available in the sharing economy. Besides those studies aimed at understanding commercialised consumer interest in the sharing economy (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Chudzian, 2015; Fitzmaurice et al., 2020; Grybaitė & Stankevičienė, 2016; Hamari et al., 2016; Hawlitschek et al., 2018; Hellwig et al., 2015; Lawson et al., 2016; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018; Owyang & Samuel, 2015; Zalega, 2018), there has been even less empirical research that has

explained the social benefits associated with the peer-to-peer, non-monetary sharing economy. Unlike other contexts of consumption and without a universal commoditised value (like money) to guide the interaction, a non-monetary sharing economy has relied on the social interactions and the value exchange partners get from these social interactions. Research has continued to reveal that people have interacted with each other using tangible resources at their disposal (e.g. *free* accommodation) in order to potentially benefit (Chudzian, 2015; Palgan et al., 2017).

This current study aimed to go beyond these broad tangible benefits and explored the nuances of these social or experiential benefits available to Couchsurfers. There has already been a growing body of knowledge around some of the social benefits motivating individuals to participate in Couchsurfing and other non-monetary sharing economy platforms (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Geiger et al., 2018; Fraanje & Spaargaren, 2019; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018; Möhlmann, 2015; Ma et al., 2019; Parigi et al., 2013; Parigi & State, 2014; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). This has been useful to continue to build on and potentially frame these social benefits in view of a reciprocal social exchange.

This study does not only benefit academia. The role of such a study could also assist regulators, government and businesses in understanding, and explaining sustained participation in the sharing economy. This would ensure that the social integrity of the sharing economy remains in-tact and to avoid these social relationships becoming contractual relationships instead. The emergence of sharing economy platforms has also become inseparable from the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab & Davis, 2018). The fourth industrial revolution has recognised that the way people socialise, consume, and work will change as the world moves towards more digitally enabled platforms. Without an understanding of the social exchange dynamics in

existing digitally enabled communities, decisions could continue to be biased towards the commoditised exchange dynamics.

1.4. Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the social interactions among peers in a non-monetary sharing economy, namely Couchsurfing. Using the lens of social exchange theory, the study sought to explore the recalled experiences of Couchsurfers when interacting with their peers. Using a thematic analysis framework approach, these experiences provided clarity on the social nature of these interactions and facilitated an understanding of the outcomes that these peers experienced when interacting with each other.

1.5. Working Definitions

Defining the **sharing economy** has remained problematic (Belk, 2014b; Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Erving, 2014; Frenken, 2017; Frenken & Schor, 2017; Grybaitė & Stankevičienė, 2016; Heuber, 2017; Meelen & Frenken, 2015; Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2015). In simplest terms, the sharing economy is when stakeholders come together under limited external governance and regulations to share, collaborate or exchange (Matofska, 2014; Samuel, 2015; Balaram, 2016; Kramer, 2016; Hossain, 2020). This coming together is what encompasses an **interaction**.

The scope for this current study had been refined on two fronts. The first dealt with the context where the means of engagement has been non-monetary. **Non-monetary** means that the sharing economy does not require individuals to come together to pay for goods or services that are on offer (e.g. the accommodation in Couchsurfing is for *free*). The second refinement was related to interactions that were among peers. **Peer-to-peer** means that there is no hierarchy

between individuals and the interactions are strictly among members of a particular sharing economy. In the context of this study, Couchsurfing members are called Couchsurfers. Furthermore, when interacting with each other as members, they adopt the roles of host or guest.

There is a relationship of host-and-guest when Couchsurfers come together. To articulate the nature of the relationship under study, the wording, **social nature of the interaction** was used. The social nature of the interaction was in reference to the social behaviour that became evident once these individuals came together and the face-to-face interaction took place (for example, sharing). The nature of the interaction has also been referred to as the type of the interaction (Harvey et al., 2014).

1.6. Delimitations of the Study

1.6.1. What is being studied?

The sharing economy is broad. To explore social interactions in the sharing economy required refining the context where these were most evident. Therefore, the focus of this study was refined to a single non-monetary sharing economy platform. In addition to this, the means of socially interacting with each other can happen in either the digital realm or the offline realm. To ensure that there was enough essence and nuance around the social interactions, an environment that created opportunities for peers to come together and interact face-to-face was sought out. This would ensure that this study would ideally build on the contributions that have already been made from understanding the digital sphere (Huang, Cheng, Huang & Teng, 2018; Surma, 2016; Tsai & Kang, 2019; Wang et al., 2019; Yan et al., 2016). Lastly, the choice of platform needed to ensure that there was considerable engagement within this sharing economy. With over 14 million users, Couchsurfing provided a suitable context.

1.6.2. Who is being studied?

There are three stakeholders involved in the sharing economy, namely peers, platforms and businesses (Benoit et al., 2017). For the purposes of this research study, only the social interactions among peers were explored. In other words, the peers were members of Couchsurfing who participated as a host or guest, or they hung out with each other. These peers are better known as Couchsurfers or as has been evidenced in these research findings, *"surfers"*.

1.6.3. Where are they being studied?

This study focused on understanding the face-to-face interactions. For this reason, Couchsurfers were interviewed based on their recollections of past experiences where they interacted with others on the Couchsurfing platform. Furthermore, the researcher was an active participant during the process and used participant observations and the permitted, publicly accessible, online content to enhance the interpretation of these recollected experiences.

1.7. Research Questions

In view of two broad research objectives, the following research questions emerged in view of seeking relevance for social exchange theory.

- To provide clarity around the social nature of the interaction that occurs in Couchsurfing.
    - How does the reciprocal nature of the interaction feature in Couchsurfing?
    - What measures do Couchsurfers use to ensure that the interaction was reciprocal?
    - How would altruism affect the social nature of the Couchsurfing interaction?

- To provide an understanding of outcomes of the social nature of the interaction in Couchsurfing.
    - How do both individuals in the reciprocal exchange maximise their rewards?

2. Literature Review

This chapter presents the literature relevant to the focus of this study in view of the sharing economy and social exchange theory. Defining what encompasses the sharing economy had formed the departure point towards setting the context for this study. This study has specifically looked at Couchsurfing – a non-monetary, peer-to-peer sharing economy. In a non-monetary setting, there happens to be more reliance on social interactions between peers (Davlembayeva et al., 2020; Geiger et al., 2018; Parigi et al., 2013; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020).

The focus on social interactions in a sharing economy suggested that the setting was ideal to explore the relevance of a theoretical framework grounded in social psychology. There have already been several contributions that have used theoretical perspectives from this field of study to understand or explain behaviour in hospitality and across sharing economy platforms. These include: Construal level theory (Sordi, Perin, Petrini & Sampaio, 2018); new institutional theory (Gollnhofer et al., 2016; Gonzalez-Padron, 2017); self-determination theory (Böchker & Meelen, 2017); social exchange theory (Davlembayeva et al., 2020; Geiger et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2019; Priporas et al., 2017; Tsai & Kang, 2019; Wang et al., 2019); social framing theory (Palgan et al., 2017); social practice theory (Piscicelli et al., 2015; Fraanje & Spaargaren, 2019; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020); social presence theory (Cheng, 2016); the theory of planned behaviour (Roos & Hahn, 2017; Hawlitschek et al., 2018; Kim, Woo & Nam, 2018); and the theory of reasoned action (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017) – to name a few.

The necessity for clarity around the social nature of these peer-to-peer interactions provided an opportunity to explore relevance for social exchange theory in a non-monetary sharing economy environment (namely, Couchsurfing). An overview of the applicability of

social exchange theory to the sharing economy has been presented in this chapter. Previous contributions to the theory have found the dynamics of the exchange have been reciprocal in these peer-to-peer environments (Davlembayeva et al., 2020; Geiger et al., 2018). However, there is more to reciprocity from a social exchange theory perspective (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels & Hall, 2017; Molm, 2010) that has yet to be identified in this non-monetary sharing economy context. This chapter concludes by specifying the research questions as they pertained to clarifying the reciprocal exchange, providing an understanding of how these reciprocal relationships are managed, and identifying the outcomes from the exchange in view of the theoretical framework based on social interactions in Couchsurfing.

2.1. The Sharing Economy

The sharing economy is where people with similar interests and goals engage directly with one another. The purpose of this engagement is to share, exchange, collaborate, learn, create, barter, produce, trade, consume, distribute or rent resources with the opportunity to co-create shared value (Balaram, 2016; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Hamari et al., 2016; Hossain, 2020; Kramer, 2016; Matofska, 2014; Samuel, 2015). Unlike the traditional economy where the trade of goods or services takes place with a contracted business representative assisting the exchange, the sharing economy entails that the relationship does not require someone in between the provider of goods and the recipient (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015). Individuals using the sharing economy engage directly with their peers or strangers (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Schor, 2017). More so, there are no formalised rules that govern the interaction (Balaram, 2016; Owyang & Samuel, 2015).

Participation in the sharing economy has seen considerable growth since its emergence over a decade ago (Constable, 2017; Grybaitė & Stankevičienė, 2016; Martin, 2016; Owyang &

Samuel, 2015; Rinne et al., 2013; Samuel, 2015). Although, there is evidence to suggest that the adoption of these platforms have not been as widespread as originally proposed (Rinne, 2018). The use of the sharing economy is localised, and adoption practices were less evident in developing countries, like India – primarily because of a lack of awareness (Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018). Despite the differences in uptake around the world, reports indicate that some sharing economy platforms have higher net-worth valuations than their traditional trade-based competitors that have been in operation for more than half a century (Chang, 2014; Geron, 2013; Matzler, Veider & Kathan, 2015; Owyang & Samuel, 2015; PWC, 2014). Even large corporates have started to offer sharing economy type services in order to attract consumers towards their brands (Samuel, 2015).

The upswing in participation in the sharing economy has been credited to a global agenda that has been necessitating sustainable solutions for the environment (Hamari et al., 2016; John, 2013; Martin, 2016; Owyang & Samuel, 2015; Piscicelli et al., 2015) and the emergence of the digital age where technology has made people are more accessible to one another (John, 2013; Kramer, 2016; Lahti & Selossma, 2013; Rinne et al., 2013). The agenda around sustainability and digital enablement have fast-tracked the sharing economy to have a presence in various industries (Ertz, Durif & Arcand, 2016; Hamari et al., 2016; John, 2013; Nica & Potcovaru, 2015). There are companies or non-profit organisations facilitating digital and offline platforms for the coming together of these individuals to help them share, exchange and collaborate (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015; Owyang & Samuel, 2015). These sharing economy platforms exist in hospitality (AirBnB, Couchsurfing), transport (Uber, Zipcar, Lyft), travel (TripAdvisor), logistics (ShareMyStorage.com), insurance (Lemonade, Pineapple), job creation (TaskRabbit),

classifieds (Craigslist, Gumtree), product development (Kickstarter), arts and culture (Burning Man, AfrikaBurn), and knowledge sharing (Wikipedia, TED Talk, Youtube), to name a few.

A criticism related to the sharing economy is that is has become too encompassing because the sharing economy has been differentiated from traditional type economies by its online functionality and enablement (Schor, 2016; Schor & Cansoy, 2019). Many businesses in the traditional economy have been creating their own online portals that allow consumers to purchase goods and request services (Arcidiacono et al., 2018; Balaram, 2016; Meelen & Frenken, 2015; Samuel, 2015; Schor et al., 2016). The inclusion of many e-commerce type platforms into the sharing economy has made it harder to distinguish some of the sharing economy platforms from the traditional economy (Belk, 2014b; Erving, 2014; Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Frenken, 2017; Frenken & Schor, 2017; Grybaitė & Stankevičienė, 2016; Heuber, 2017; Meelen & Frenken, 2015; Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2015).

Not all sharing economy platforms exist online. There are some sharing economy platforms that exist offline, for example, AfrikaBurn. In addition, the collaborative behaviour associated with the sharing economy is not new. The idea of individuals working together to share and exchange resources because they were given the right set of tools has been around for millennia (Grybaitė & Stankevičienė, 2016; Humphrey, 1985; Kameda, Takezawa & Hastie, 2003; Kozinets, 2002; Ostrom, 1990; Phillips & Stodder, 1999). Digital technology, at most, has enabled the practices found in the sharing economy to happen more widely because it is more convenient (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018), more efficient (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Belk, 2014b) and more accessible (Belk, 2014b; Huber, 2017; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018) than what existed decades ago.

The breadth of the sharing economy and the lack of distinction between these platforms and the traditional economy has resulted in attempts at re-classifying the sharing economy. The re-classification attempts have included descriptive alternative naming conventions or the identification of sub-components to emphasise these distinctions from the traditional economy (Arcidiacono, Gandini & Pais, 2018; Benoit et al., 2017; Botsman & Roger, 2010; de Rivera, Gordo, Cassidy & Apestegia, 2017; Frenken, Meelen, Arets & van de Glind, 2015; Frenken & Schor, 2017; Huber, 2018). The descriptive alternative naming conventions and the sub-components of the sharing economy – while not the full extensive list – have been tabulated in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Alternative naming conventions for the sharing economy or sub-components of the sharing economy

		Description		Method	
Alternative descriptions	Reference	As a whole	Sub-component	Conceptual	Empirical Research
Access-based consumption	Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012)	✓		✓	
	Lawson, Gleim, Perren and Hwang (2016)		✓		✓
Access economy	Eckhardt and Bardhi (2015)	✓		✓	
	Al-Oraij and Al-Aali (2016)	✓		✓	
Barter economy	Belk (2014a)	✓		✓	
Collaborative commerce	Sigala (2015)	✓		✓	
Collaborative economy	Owyang and Samuel (2015)	✓		✓	
	Samuel (2015)	✓		✓	
	Dredge and Gyimóthy (2015)	✓		✓	
	O'Regan and Choe (2017)	✓		✓	
Collaborative Consumption	Botsman and Rogers (2010)	✓		✓	
	John (2013)	✓			✓
	Harvey, Smith and Golightly (2014)	✓			✓
	Chudzian (2015)	✓			✓
	Möhlmann (2015)	✓			✓
	Piscicelli, Cooper and Fisher (2015)	✓			✓
	Tussyadiah (2015)	✓			✓
	Edbring, Lehner and Mont (2016)	✓			✓
	Ertz, Durif and Arcand (2016)	✓		✓	
	Hamari, Ukkonen and Sjóklint (2016)	✓			✓
	Hartl, Hofmann and Kirchler (2016)	✓			✓
	Martin and Upham (2016)	✓			✓

	Barnes and Mattsson (2017)	✓			✓
	Benoit, Baker, Bolton, Gruber and Kandampully (2017)		✓	✓	
	de Rivera, Gordo, Cassidy and Apestegia (2017)	✓			✓
	Heuber (2017)	✓		✓	
	Carrión (2018)	✓		✓	
	Mathangi and Rajeswari (2018)	✓			✓
	Sordi, Perin, Petrini and Sampaio (2018)	✓			✓
	Zalega (2018)	✓			✓
	Fraanje and Spaagaren (2019)	✓			✓
Collaborative Nonownership Consumption	Habibi, Kim and Laroche (2016)		✓		✓
Commercial sharing system	Akbar, Mai and Hoffman (2016)	✓			✓
Gift economy	Kozinets (2002)	✓			✓
Human economy	Kramer (2016)	✓		✓	
Hybrid economy	Rafkin (2015)	✓		✓	
	Scaraboto (2015)	✓			✓
On-demand economy	Stein (2015)	✓		✓	
	Frenken (2017)		✓	✓	
	Frenken and Schor (2017)		✓	✓	
Peer-to-peer consumption	Sacks (2011)	✓		✓	
	Samuel (2015)	✓		✓	
Peer-to-peer sharing (PPS)	Schaffner, Georgi and Federspiel (2017)		✓		✓
	Hawslitschek, Teubner and Gimpel (2018)		✓		✓
Shared consumption	Roos and Hahn (2017)	✓			✓

Pursuits towards articulating distinguishing qualities about the sharing economy by using alternative naming conventions have been biased by the commercial viability of the sharing economy. As such, social behaviour has been ignored at the centre of these re-classification attempts (Arcidiacono et al., 2018). Therefore, in view of non-consensus around a preferred alternative name, this study continued refer to the sharing economy as opposed to these other alternative names (see Table 2.1, p.32). Using the term sharing economy has ensured academic continuity and alignment with key publications cited by others in the field (Cheng, 2016; Ertz, Durif & Arcand, 2016; Hamari et al., 2016; Hossain, 2020; Martin, 2016; Richardson, 2015; Schor, 2016).

This study has also carefully considered the context from which to explore social behaviour within the broad sharing economy landscape. Belk (2014a) and Huber (2018) set the departure point in terms of formulating the context for refining the sharing economy for this research study. Both emphasised the importance of understanding what brings people together through social interactions and their participation that occurs within the sharing economy. The next section provides clarity around why the non-monetary, peer-to-peer sharing economy environment would provide the ideal context to explore social interactions.

2.2. Refining the Context of the Research to the Non-monetary, Peer-to-peer Sharing Economy

The sharing economy is a peer-to-peer based system. This statement is not ignoring the other roles or relationships that exist within the ecosystem, like the platform for interactions or the resources being traded (Benoit et al., 2017; Hawlitschek, Teubner & Weinhardt, 2016; Rinne et al., 2013; Schor, 2016). Rather, the purpose of this statement was to emphasise where this study is relevant to the broader sharing economy. This peer-to-peer based system creates a

unique dynamic in the sharing economy. Central to peer-to-peer interactions in the sharing economy is that individuals come together to share, exchange, or even collaborate with strangers (Botsmans & Rogers, 2010; Frenken & Schor, 2017; Richardson, 2015; Schor et al., 2016). There is also more reliance on the interaction being social than there is when an individual is in a commoditised environment (Belk, 2014a; Benoit et al., 2017; Casado-Diaz et al., 2020; Chudzian, 2015; Schor, 2016).

There are some sharing economy platforms, such as Uber, that have been labelled as being peer-to-peer but they operate in the same way that a company would in the traditional economy. This is because there are contracting requirements that have been determined for one of the individuals in the interaction (namely, the drivers). This means that the operating model is no different to ordering a private taxi (Meelen & Frenken, 2015; O'Regan & Choe, 2017). The interaction that develops when engaging with a contracted business representative, as opposed to a peer-to-peer engagement, is different because there is less reliance on the interaction needing to be social (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015). It is matter of receiving a service that the contracted individuals are obliged to perform.

There is another factor that minimises the potential for a social connection to develop in these peer-to-peer environments. This is when money is used as a means of exchange. Money reduces the exchange process to a contract of receiving goods or a service based on agreed bartering system (Benoit et al., 2017; Hamari et al., 2016; Hawlitschek et al., 2018; Hellwig et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2018; Kramer, 2016; Sordi et al., 2018; Zalega, 2018). This contracted relationship limits the possibility for social interactions to develop between exchange partners (Belk, 2010; Belk, 2014a; Benoit et al., 2017; Casado-Diaz et al., 2020). Money has a universal value assigned to it. Introducing money into the environment ensures there is a fairness between

the goods that are distributed, and the amount of money paid towards obtaining or using those goods (Haselhuhn & Mellers, 2005; Leman, Keller, Takezawa & Gummerum, 2009; Martin, 2016).

O'Regan and Choe (2017) have argued that monetary-based platforms (like AirBnB and Uber) reduce the prospect of a true peer-to-peer interaction evolving. More specifically, those platforms where there is an opportunity for social connections to form align better to what a sharing economy should be about. The challenge though is that quite a substantial amount of research has gone into understanding the sharing economy where money is a standard means of exchange. The presence of a commoditised monetary exchange system in the environment is leading to a consistent finding across several studies where the key driver for participation is the monetary benefit (Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Fitzmaurice et al., 2020; Hamari et al., 2016; Lawson et al., 2016; Hawlitschek et al., 2018; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018; Zalega, 2018).

A different dynamic in the peer-to-peer relationship emerges when money does not feature as the means of participation. The exclusion of monetary-based exchanges within the peer-to-peer environment means that there is more reliance on the social connection that needs to be formed between interacting parties (Chudzian, 2015). It is from this juncture that the scope of the research was refined. To explore the social nature of the interactions in the sharing economy, it was necessary to identify a platform where direct peer-to-peer interactions were evident. More specifically, the environment needed to be a non-monetary environment, and no one was engaging directly with a contracted employee of the platform.

2.3. Couchsurfing as a Non-monetary Sharing Economy

Couchsurfing is a peer-to-peer accommodation sharing economy platform. From its inception in 2004, Couchsurfing has remained differentiated from other peer-to-peer accommodation platforms (e.g. AirBnB) because its members have access to free accommodation. Couchsurfing has attracted over 14 million users to its platform across 200,000 cities around the world (Couchsurfing, 2020a). These members are called Couchsurfers.

With its membership expansion, the purpose and the essence that the platform offers to the Couchsurfing community has also developed. Couchsurfing has always offered travellers the opportunity to stay with locals. More than this, the Couchsurfing website positions the platform as a community where the members connect in "meaningful ways" and "share their lives" with each other (see Figure 2.1, p.39, Couchsurfing, 2020a).

Couchsurfing has been enabled by having an online presence (i.e. website and app). To become a member, individuals are required to register online. For security reasons, the registration process requires a few verification steps. These include paying a small fee (e.g. US$20), verifying their physical address, verifying their cellphone number, and/or verify their identity by using their government-issued ID. After registration, the member has the option of updating their online profile based on personal information (e.g. about me, philosophy, about their home, why I'm on Couchsurfing).

A Couchsurfer has the option of being an active participant in four ways.

1. Host – invites other travellers into their home by offering them a place to sleep (e.g. bed, couch)
2. Guest – sends a private or public request to stay with other Couchsurfers

3. Hang out – provides an opportunity for fellow members to meet up and get to hang out for the day
4. Events – attend or organise an event to meet other Couchsurfers

More importantly, the platform aims to govern the safety and security of its members by providing a few guidelines to its members (Couchsurfing, 2020b). There are a few core safety measures that an individual can use to assess their risk of meeting another Couchsurfer not previously known to them (see Annexure 8, p.270, Couchsurfing, 2020b):

- Profiles for members
- A review system where former Couchsurfers would have given a positive, negative or neutral rating of that member
- A communications function (i.e. message inbox) to e-meet another member
- An online function to report matters confidentially to the "Trust and Safety team"

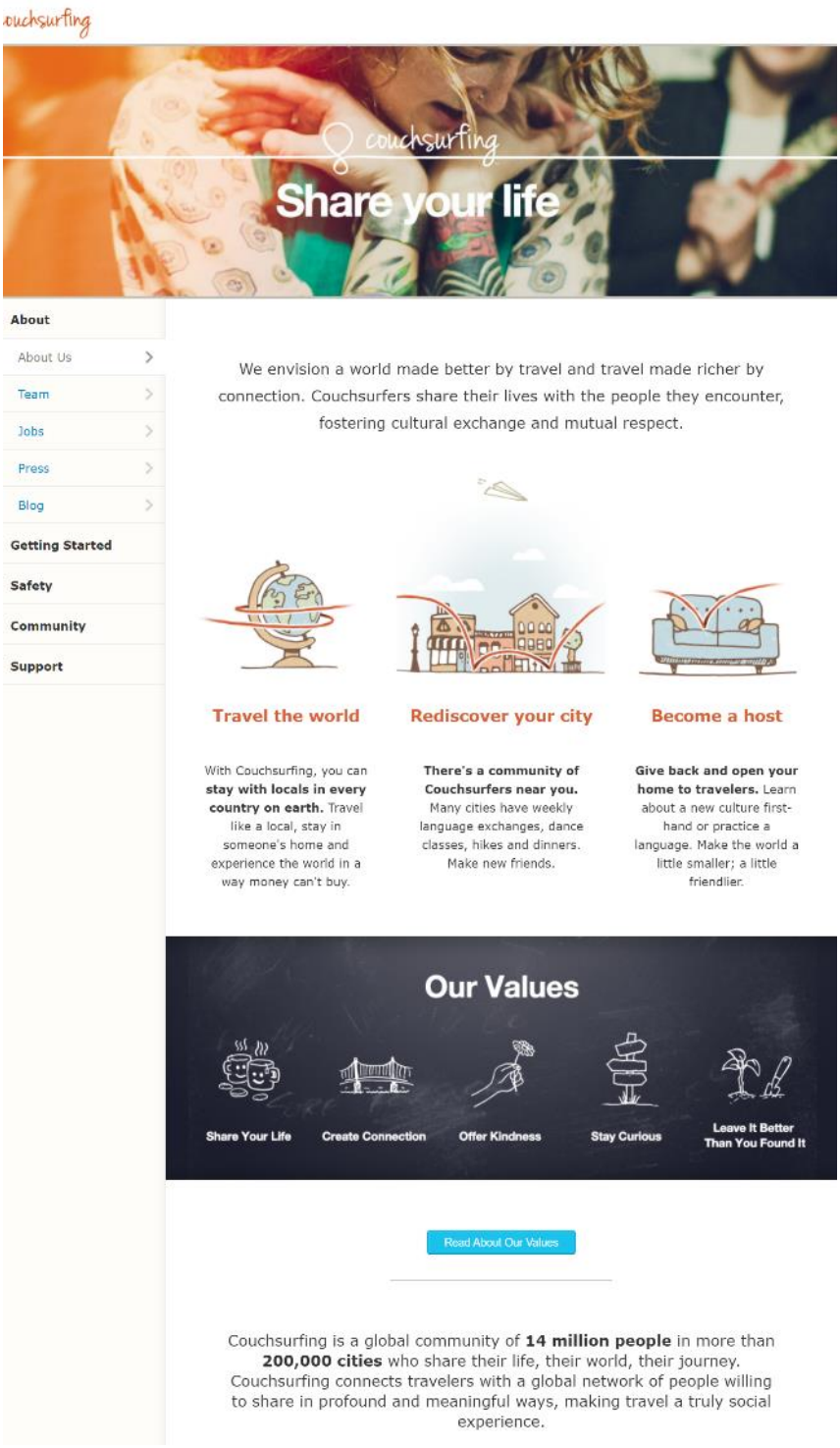


Figure 2.1: An extract from the About Us webpage tab on the Couchsurfing website (Couchsurfing, 2020a).

Couchsurfers have been known for selecting a host or a guest based on their "gut feel" (Geiger et al., 2018). Once the members have decided and accepted the request to host or use the platform as a guest, there is some communication that continues to happen online. The online messaging application assists these individuals in becoming familiar with each other and they get to plan their Couchsurfing experience together. The remainder of the Couchsurfing experience happens when they meet each other face-to-face. Once the face-to-face interaction between Couchsurfers commences, Couchsurfers self-curate how they engage with others in the community (Harvey et al., 2014). Couchsurfing interactions are filled with a vested interest by both parties to discuss various matters, co-create the experience, and explore the local context more authentically (Davlembayeva et al., 2020; Geiger et al, 2018; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). These individuals remain curious throughout the interaction (Jung & Lee, 2017). Individuals make a trade-off between paying for comfort with little opportunity to socialise (e.g. hotels) or staying for free with the potential compromise on comfort (e.g. Couchsurfing) but being afforded the opportunity to socially engage (Schucker, Peters & Pilz, 2017; Geiger et al., 2018).

In summary, Couchsurfing was an ideal sharing economy platform to conduct the research for three reasons. First, the environment excluded money as a form of exchange for the commodities on offer (e.g. accommodation, attending events). Second, the website acknowledged that at its core, the platform is about enabling social connections through sharing and giving back (see Figure 2.1, p.39, Couchsurfing, 2020a). Third, former research confirmed that there was a reliance on the social exchange in this non-monetary sharing economy (Davlembayeva et al., 2019, 2020; Geiger et al., 2018; Jung & Lee, 2017).

2.4. The Context of Hospitality

Couchsurfing is a unique sharing economy platform because as much as it forms part of accommodation sharing, it can also start to be considered from a hospitality perspective (Chen, 2018; Paulauskaite, Powell, Coca-Stefaniak & Morrison, 2017). Hospitality has been shrouded in debate around its definition (Lynch, Molz, McIntosh, Lugosi & Lashley, 2011; Lashley, 2013). There are various positions around defining hospitality. From an overview of the literature on hospitality from a social context perspective, it can be defined as a relationship between a host and a guest, where a host accommodates the guest in a way that is often welcoming, accommodating, and receptive (Brotherton, 1999; Brotherton & Wood, 2007; Lynch et al., 2011; Lugosi, 2009). The study of hospitality has followed a similar path to that of the sharing economy. Research around hospitality has been too focused on the economic activity and this has resulted in a movement towards the social nature of hospitality (Brotherton & Wood, 2007; Heal, 1990; Aramberri, 2001).

The basis of hospitality has highlighted that there are two exchanging parties involved in the experience, that is the host and the guest. There is also evidence that the relationship between the host and the guest is complicated by a social relationship that exists between them (Lynch et al., 2011). There is evidence that both individuals come together with a social ethic in mind (Germann Molz & Gibson, 2016; Gibson, 2003). This social ethic is partly based on the cultural and religious background of the individual (Coulson, MacLaren, McKenzie & O'Gorman, 2014; Lashley, 2013; Lashley, 2017; Selwyn, 2013; Walton, 2013; Walton, 2017). Being based on a religious or cultural norm suggests that being hospitable is a moral obligation and not offered out of good will (Selwyn, 2013). However, further research into social relationships around hospitality has alluded to two further conceptual areas of consideration.

The first of these two conceptual areas of consideration points to a relationship where either the host or the guest has tried to control the other in the relationship through manipulation (Brotherton & Wood, 2007; Burgess, 1982; Lugosi, 2009). The other conceptual area of consideration points to an orderly, hospitable experience where both individuals are in mutual agreement (Lashley, 2013; Selwyn, 2013). These two areas of consideration have been at the forefront of understanding the social relationships as being either exchange-driven or collaborative (Belk, 2010; Belk, 2014a).

Research contributions in the hospitality environment have focused on addressing these questions around the social relationships between host and guest (e.g. Chen, 2018; Heal, 1990; Heuman, 2005; Lashley, 2013; Paulauskaite et al., 2017). These contributions to hospitality are important in the context of the theoretical framework that was used to guide this thesis in either supporting or challenging social exchange theory.

2.5. Social Exchange Theory

Couchsurfing encourages a social exchange to form between individuals. This is not only because it says so on its website, but it is also because these interactions are less about a monetary transaction taking place and more about the social relationships that develop (Benoit et al., 2017; Davlembayeva et al., 2020; Decrop; Del Chiappa; Mallergé & Zidda, 2018; Geiger et al., 2018; Jung & Lee, 2017; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). The dynamics of the Couchsurfing interaction being social in nature provided an opportunity to find relevance for social exchange theory and potentially expand on the tenets of the theory. The contribution towards social exchange theory in this study has been refined to the social nature and outcomes of the interaction. More specifically, the theory assisted in providing a framework to understand

the motivation for people coming together to interact with each other, the dynamics that affected the interaction, and the benefits that individuals sought from the interaction.

Social exchange theory has suggested that in any social interaction, something is offered, and something is received in exchange for the offering (Blau, 1964; Ekeh, 1974; Li, 2015; Molm, 1990, Molm, 2010; Stafford, 2008). The social interaction is a process whereby people are motivated by the rewards available to them during that exchange (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). People contribute during the interaction knowing that there is a possibility to gain from the same interaction (Blau, 1964; Ekeh, 1974; Emerson, 1976).

The contributions made during the exchange have been framed as a cost. The gains that individuals experience have been referred to as rewards. These concepts of cost and rewards were borrowed from economics (Homans, 1958, 1961). However, the use of these terms in social exchange theory do not equate to monetary values in the same way as it does in economics. Instead, the cost and the reward in any social exchange are subjective in nature. Cost is the negative value associated to the time, effort and resources expended during the exchange. The reward is the subjective experience of the benefit or gain that is derived from being willing to forfeit something in that same exchange (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). The social process whereby a contribution is made and there is a gain that experienced in return is known as a reciprocal exchange (Emerson, 1976).

2.5.1. Reciprocity as the social nature of the interaction.

Reciprocity has remained a key defining factor of social exchange theory when explaining the behaviour of two or more individuals coming together to interact with each other (Blau, 1964; Ekeh, 1974; Molm, 1990, Stafford, 2008; Molm, 2010; Li, 2015). The nature of the

reciprocal relationship, as it has been related to the social exchange theory, is best described as *"the principle that one person does another a favour, and while there is a general expectation of some future return, its exact nature is definitely not stipulated in advance"* (Blau, 1986, p.93).

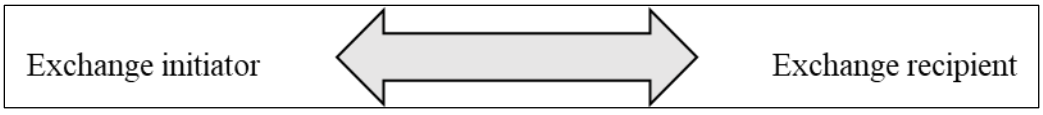
There are two points being made by Blau (1986) through this summarised definition of reciprocity according to social exchange theory. The first point is that the recipient responds by doing another a favour in return for what was provided to them. The second point is that the provider in the relationship has expectations of receiving back a favour, but these expectations should remain unspecified to the recipient (Blau, 1964). These two points have been elaborated on further as well as how they framed the research questions relating to this study.

2.5.1.1. Doing another a favour in return as way of reciprocating

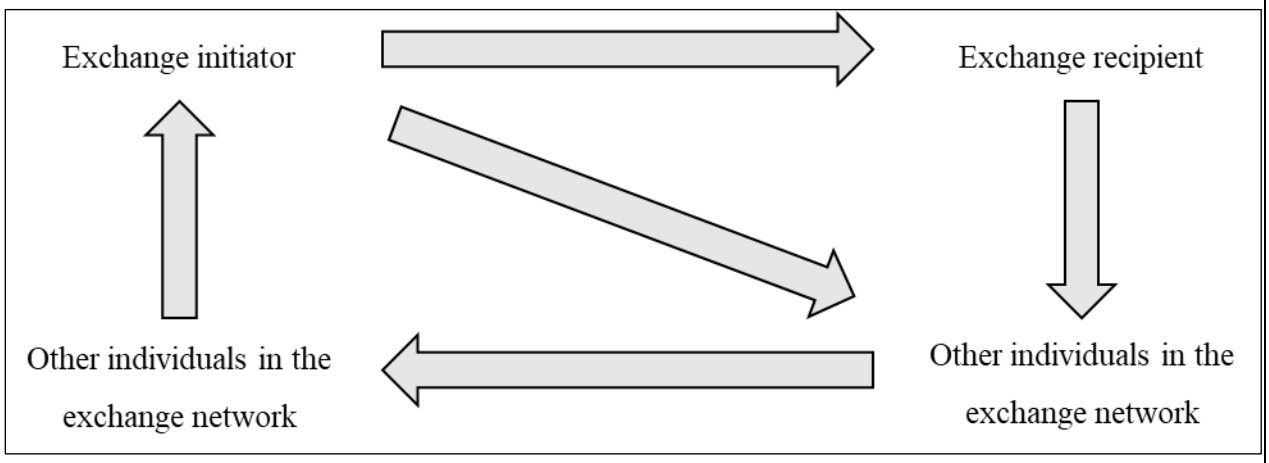
The process of the reciprocal exchange and how individuals get something in return has been expanded by Molm (2010). The reciprocal process is often related to an exchange flow that happens bi-directionally (i.e. bilateral). Stated simply, there is an exchange initiator that provides to the needs of another. This is followed up by a reciprocal response by that recipient. This has been the frame from which most reciprocal exchanges were identified and explored in the sharing economy (e.g. Geiger et al., 2018; Harvey et al., 2014).

There is also a uni- directional (i.e. unilateral) flow during the exchange (Molm, 2010). During this unilateral process, the exchange flows in one direction without the exchange initiator receiving something directly in return from the recipient of the exchange. The unilateral flow becomes reciprocal when the exchange is returned indirectly by a third party (Molm, 2010; Takahashi, 2000). This third party does not need to have a direct unilateral or bilateral exchange relationship with original recipient of the exchange party – and as a result the exchange process

remains reciprocal within the network structure. For example, if person A offers person B a place to stay, person A does not need to receive something in return from person B, but the action can be reciprocated by another participant (person C) in the same Couchsurfing community. This indirect form of the reciprocal exchange has been evident in past research on these peer-to-peer sharing economy platforms (e.g. Forno & Garibaldi, 2015; Roblek, Štok, & Meško, 2016) when the reciprocal act was viewed as a general exchange process, such as hosting and being hosted in return by someone else in Couchsurfing. Figure 2.2 illustrates the reciprocal exchange process from both a bilateral direct and unilateral indirect perspective:



a) Bilateral flow of the reciprocal exchange process



b) Unilateral flow of the indirect reciprocal exchange network structure

Figure 2.2: The structure of reciprocity as illustrated by Molm (2010).

Reciprocity, according to social exchange theory, is not just about the exchange of tangible goods and services (Molm, Shaefer & Collett, 2007). Only focusing on the exchange of

tangible goods and services in a non-monetary sharing economy (e.g. the accommodation on offer in exchange for a prepared meal) neglects the essence of social exchange theory because it reduces the exchange to an economic exchange (e.g. Harvey et al., 2014; Palgan et al., 2017).

The reciprocal exchange can be fulfilled through social activities (Molm et al., 2007). An example of this emerged from a study about reciprocity in Couchsurfing where "both parties share stories, life lessons and learn from each other" (Geiger et al., 2018, p.10). Reciprocity is also about individuals communicating their appreciation, regard and respect for the provider in the relationship (Molm et al., 2007). Molm et al. (2007) referred to these latter social activities as an act of reciprocity. The benefit of these social activities assists in affirming that the recipient is willing to continue the reciprocal relationship and it enhances the predictability of a future reciprocal responses (Molm et al., 2017). There was support that the reciprocal exchange in Couchsurfing was ongoing and continued even after the interaction (Geiger et al., 2018; Kim, Lee, Koo & Yang, 2018). These findings were linked to the time and resources that were available to Couchsurfers during the exchange.

According to Cropanzano et al. (2017), the social exchange is about behaving in a way that is helpful and wanting to assist the contributor in the relationship. Cook and Yamagishi (1992) proposed that individuals constantly sought out an equilibrium as they depended on each other for the valued resources. This perspective would align with the collaborative nature of the interaction that has been previously observed within other various sharing economy and hospitality-based platforms (e.g. Kim et al., 2018; Lashley, 2013). Collaboration has been considered as a relationship where resources are balanced out and the interaction mutually beneficial (Belk, 2014a, 2014b; Botsman & Roger, 2010; Dikeç, 2002).

The issue with a collaborative relationship is that during a social exchange, there is a dependency on each other to balance out resources and this has resulted in power dynamics emerging (Molm, 1990, 1997, 2010). In other words, a power-dependency happens after there has been a provision made by one of the individuals in the relationship. The individual with the power advantage could manipulate their counterpart into giving back more than is required (Burgess, 1982; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Lynch et al., 2011; Molm, 1997; Human, 2005). There could also be a risk of loss or no return (non-reciprocity) in the event of a unilateral flow of exchange (Molm, 2010). The risk increases especially when the exchange flow is unilateral and indirect as well. Should an imbalance occur whereby the exchange was not fulfilled, the power dynamic shifted at the detriment of the exchanging party (Blau, 1964). According to Cropanzano et al. (2017), this is would mean that the provider in the relationship uses the power shift in their favour to seek revenge or act aggressively towards the other individual.

These power-dynamics have been evident in other cross-cultural hospitality exchange environments (e.g. cultural exchange working holidays) where hosts were at a disadvantage in the power relationship because guests were paying to participate in these community upliftment initiatives (Heuman, 2005). To balance out this power dynamic, hosts provided access to local knowledge and protection (in the form of lodging, food, and security). Individuals (i.e. guests) coming into these community environments would support the premise that they were there to manipulate and control the reciprocation for their benefit (Brotherton & Wood, 2007; Burgess, 1982; Lugosi, 2009; Lynch et al., 2011). Despite these reciprocal actions by hosts, these guests continued to contribute to the exchange by performing their duties and remained obedient (Heuman, 2005). This continuous giving and taking in this cross-cultural context denoted that

there was also a collective attitude of reciprocation by those engaging in a social exchange (Lashley, 2013; Lynch et al., 2011).

These power dynamics have been expected in Couchsurfing as well. Unlike the former example in the culture exchange working holiday example where guests held the power advantage, there were indications that the host in a Couchsurfing interaction often held the power advantage (Chen, 2018; Geiger et al., 2018). Sometimes the guests exhibited behaviour that only through observation suggested that there could have been a power imbalance. Guests have been known to hide any inappropriate behaviour away from their hosts (for example, hiding away luxury handbags a guest purchased while out shopping) for fear of it being improper considering that the host has offered the guest a free place to stay (Chen, 2018). Even if there was an underlying power imbalance, Couchsurfing hosts were found to invest time and effort into caring for their guests and being hospitable (Geiger et al., 2018). More so, Couchsurfers perceived the environment to be mutually beneficial to both individuals in the exchange (Davlembayeva et al., 2020; Geiger et al., 2018; Parigi et al, 2013).

Over the years, there have been various postulations around how these power dynamics played out (Baldwin, 1978; Blau, 1986; Cook & Emerson, 1978; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Emerson, 1972; Molm, 1997). The postulation that came closest to explaining the mutually beneficial behaviour in Couchsurfing has been when individuals did not always look to take advantage of their exchange partners but rather there was an emphasis on reward seeking behaviour (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Molm, 1990, 1997, 2010). Couchsurfers have been known to behave in this collaborative way because of the perceived value they ascribed to the social activities or acts of reciprocity that are exchanged (Davlembayeva et al., 2020; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). Despite these findings, the literature has been thin on describing this

mutually beneficial, collaborative way of exchanging within Couchsurfing within the context of social exchange theory.

Research in the Couchsurfing environment appeared to be in support of the subjective nature of the reciprocal dynamics and the social activities that formed part of the reciprocal exchange as has been previously explained by social exchange theory. However, there was an opportunity to clarify further how a helpful and collaborative exchange in Couchsurfing could be relayed back to reciprocity according to social exchange theory. Therefore, it was necessary to seek more clarity around the social nature of the interaction in this study and how these reciprocal interactions played out in Couchsurfing.

2.5.1.2. Having expectations in a reciprocal exchange

There are expectations of a reciprocal response during the social exchange. Exchange partners can keep these expectations unspecified upfront. This is known as voluntary reciprocity because the reciprocal response comes naturally and without coercion (Blau, 1964, 1986). Expectations can also be negotiated upfront (Cook & Emerson, 1978; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). A negotiated exchange means that both individuals come to a communicated agreement on how the exchange would take place. Blau (1964) made it clear that, even though individuals have expectations of the favour being returned to them, the exchange can only be reciprocal when these expectations remained unspecified and not negotiated. The reason a voluntary exchange has been considered as reciprocal, as opposed to a negotiated exchange as well, is because of the impact that it has on forming a social bond (or dependency) between exchange partners (Blau, 1964; Cook & Rice, 2013; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When there are no prescribed rules for a reciprocal exchange, trust is more likely to be formed and a stronger social connection with the exchange partner emerges than when it is a negotiated exchange (Blau,

1964, 1986; Molm, 2000, 2010). The risk of having a negotiated exchange is that the provider in the relationship often held the upper hand in the relationship. Those who negotiated their exchange used the reciprocal exchange to manipulate their partner through coercion or punishment to ensure their counterpart returned the favour (Molm, 2000, 2010). As such, the negotiated exchange has been unlikely to lead to a favourable social relationship (Cook & Rice, 2013; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Couchsurfers have been known to have expectations around receiving something in return (Geiger et al., 2018). Although, it has been unclear whether these expectations were unspecified before the exchange or negotiated during the exchange (e.g. Davlembayeva et al., 2020; Geiger et al., 2018). Based on social exchange theory, it has been anticipated that a voluntary reciprocal response from the guest would be more socially rewarding for the host, whereas an action of overt coercion during the reciprocal interaction would leave the host feeling unrewarded (e.g. Blau, 1964, 1986; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

An interaction where there are expectations of a future return has been criticised as selfish act and non-collaborative – and not a behaviour that should be present in a true sharing economy (Belk, 2014a, 2014b). Belk reasoned that if any self-gratifying behaviour were evident in the sharing economy, it would go against the premise of what it would mean to collaborate. Belk (2014b) defined collaborating as the means of distributing resources fairly without anyone having an expectation of benefitting in return (Belk, 2014b). Although, it is suspected that Belk's interpretation of reciprocity meant that the exchange was negotiated as opposed to collaboration where the exchange flowed without prior expectations being communicated (Belk, 2014a, 2014b).

It appeared that reciprocal relationships have been beneficial to those engaging in these non-monetary sharing economy settings (Benoit et al., 2017; Davlembayeva et al., 2020). Couchsurfers also preferred a reciprocal exchange where they got something in return (Geiger et al., 2018). However, it remained to be seen whether Couchsurfers were aware of their expectations of a future return and what would happen when their expectations of a future return became apparent to their exchange partner. These two research needs have been stated more broadly into understanding the measures Couchsurfers used to ensure that the exchange remained reciprocal and mutually beneficial to both exchange partners.

2.5.2. Altruism as the social nature of the interaction.

Sharing is another social behaviour that has been recognised as being part of the sharing economy. The use of the term sharing has been used extensively in the literature without much thought when describing how people are interacting with each other in a sharing economy (e.g. Akbar, Mai & Hoffman, 2016; Benoit et al., 2017; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015; Hellwig, Morhart, Kocher & Zisiadis, 2014; Rinne et al., 2013; Roos & Hahn, 2017). There is even concern that the term sharing has come to mean “renting” (Balaram, 2016). The semantics around this word and the use of sharing in reference to behaviour between peers in the sharing economy has continued to create confusion (Arcidiacono et al., 2018; Habibi et al., 2016). Sharing has been related to an altruistic action where there have been no expectations of getting anything in return (Belk, 2010; Benkler, 2004; Rudmin, 2016). This definition for sharing was borrowed from Sahlins (1972).

Hospitality has been recognised as a potential environment where the social behaviour could be altruistic in nature (Lashley, 2013). The genuine hospitable treatment of guests, who were once strangers to the host, and providing a secure protective environment has led some to conclude that individuals have shown altruistic actions. However, when considering the motives

behind these actions, the behaviour is not completely altruistic (Heal, 1990; Lashley, 2013; Telfer, 1996). Often the motives include trying to win favour from their counterpart, the pleasure of entertaining, opportunities to showcase and validate their social status, as well as enjoyment from helping others (Kim et al., 2018; Lashley, 2013). These types of motives (for example the enjoyment from helping others) indicate that individuals might give the perception of altruism in hospitality environments because they have not recognised the feelings (like enjoyment or pleasure) as a form of receiving something in return.

Couchsurfing has been positioned as a platform where sharing, in the form of an altruistic act, is possible (Belk, 2010, 2014b). The idea of altruism being evident in Couchsurfing has its roots in hospitality-based research where sharing has been at the heart of the exchange and sharing has elicited feelings of altruism (Lashley, 2013; Lynch et al., 2011). However, altruism in Couchsurfing has also been disputed by the ongoing support for the presence of a reciprocal exchange where individuals have expectations of wanting something in return (e.g. Benoit et al., 2017; Geiger et al., 2018; Habibi et al., 2016; Harvey et al., 2014). Having at least one individual during the interaction being altruistic also goes against the reciprocal nature of the social exchange because they engage less (Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). Individuals have participated in an exchange to meet their needs and get something out for themselves as well (Lawler & Thye, 1999). More so, there is an expectation of some sort of return even if it has not been forthcoming from the direct interaction (Blau, 1964; Molm, 2010). The necessity of a return during the social exchange dismisses the idea that altruism could exist in any social interaction unless a different lens is applied to altruism.

The structure of the reciprocity framework (see Figure 2.2, p.45) has suggested that an indirect reciprocal response can be possible. If indirect reciprocity happened to be present in

Couchsurfing, the host would be unlikely to know whether their guest fulfilled on the reciprocal exchange indirectly. This could be a different way of positioning an altruistic intention if evident among Couchsurfing hosts. For example, Couchsurfers have been known to host individuals but do not expect to be hosted in return by those same individuals (Harvey et al., 2014; Parigi et al., 2013; Parigi & State, 2014). The main issue with this positioning is that there is more to the Couchsurfing interaction than just hosting (Geiger et al., 2018; Parigi et al., 2013; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). Former research studies in the sharing economy have yet to indicate an indirect reciprocal exchange involving social activities and acts of reciprocity (e.g. showing gratitude).

Blau (1986) explained that the altruistic nature of people is a key proponent of determining the dependency of one individual on another during the social exchange. This often leads to power inequalities regarding the value of the resources that are being sought in the exchange. These power inequalities or imbalances in the exchange have been favourable when observed and reported among close kinship (Sahlins, 1972; Cropanzano et al., 2017). A giver in a close kinship would be allowed to contribute excessively without the receiver experiencing any repercussions (Sahlins, 1972). This has been reinforced by Benoit et al. (2017) when explaining that altruism only really exists within close family relations. The presence of altruism seems unlikely given that these peer-to-peer interactions on Couchsurfing are among strangers. Furthermore, altruism does not motivate individuals to use a platform like Couchsurfing, whereas, the prospect of a reciprocal relationship was more enticing (Davlembayeva et al., 2019).

Despite social exchange theory suggesting that altruism would lead to a power imbalance between exchange partners, previous research findings have been inconclusive in explaining its

presence in Couchsurfing. There have been indications from the literature on hospitality that there are genuine intentions to give without the expectation of getting anything in return exists (e.g. Coulson et al., 2014; Lashley, 2013). If altruism had existed in the context of Couchsurfing and hosts provided hospitality to strangers without an expectation of something in return, then social exchange theory would suggest that there had to be an imbalanced power dynamic in favour of those providing the hospitality (e.g. Brotherton & Wood, 2007; Human, 2005; Molm, 2010). The collaborative nature of platforms like Couchsurfing where close bonds have formed between exchange partners (e.g. Geiger et al., 2018) seems to contradict these findings. These limitations in explaining altruistic behaviour from the perspective of social exchange theory could not be ignored when exploring social interactions within the Couchsurfing context. This research study offered an opportunity to explore the potential altruistic intentions among individuals when participating in Couchsurfing in order to clarify previous claims in the literature that suggested this was the case (e.g. Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Belk, 2014a; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020) and establish whether altruism needed to be reconsidered by social exchange theory if it was present within Couchsurfing.

2.5.3. Maximising the benefits as an outcome of the reciprocal interaction.

Individuals have been motivated to engage in a reciprocal exchange based on the opportunity to gain from the relationship (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). These gains are determined by weighing-up the costs against the benefits during an exchange to determine whether it is worth continuing the reciprocal interaction (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). Early theorists like Homans (1958, 1961) explained that the social interaction has been based on individuals in the relationship seeking the lowest cost in order to maximise their own gain. The propensity to continue in the social exchange is determined by the gains that have

emerged from past interactions and the associated subjective value of these gains through continued interactions (Homans, 1974). From this premise, it can be postulated that within a sharing economy, two individuals with a direct interest in minimising the cost and maximising their gain during an interaction would consider the reciprocal exchange and potentially continue in reciprocating for as long as the benefits outweigh the cost for both individuals.

It is on this basis that previous research on monetary-based sharing economy platforms have found that the economic benefits outweigh many of the other benefits available during the interaction among peers (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Sung, Kim & Lee, 2018). People want goods and services in a convenient, effortless and cost-effective way – and the sharing economy has been the ideal place for them to find these benefits (Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015; Fraanje & Spaargaren, 2019; Frenken, 2017; Grybaitė & Stankevičienė, 2016; Habibi et al., 2016; Hawlitschek et al., 2018; Lawson et al., 2016; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018; Möhlmann, 2015; Priporas et al., 2017; Zalega,2018). As a result, people have continued to engage with others through these platforms to gain conveniently, effortlessly and cost-effectively (Ma et al., 2019). These economic benefits, which have been centred around the commercial value of the sharing economy, have led others to criticise the sharing economy for being self-centred (Belk, 2010, 2014a). In some circumstances, those using sharing economy platforms have been exploited by others to only benefit themselves economically (Lawson et al., 2016; Zalega, 2018).

Research, in the context of non-monetary peer-to-peer knowledge sharing platforms, have also revealed that the exchange has been driven by the weighing up of the costs against the benefits (Li, 2015; Tsai & Kang, 2019; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). When applying these same principles from social exchange theory to another non-monetary environment, like

Couchsurfing, it is easy to think that getting a *free place to stay* is maximising the benefit for one person in the relationship, namely the guest. However, by positioning the Couchsurfing accommodation as a *free place to stay*, has suggested that there is potentially no reward for the host in the relationship. Yet, the reciprocal relationship in Couchsurfing has ensured that both individuals in the exchange benefit (Geiger et al., 2018).

The positioning of a *free place to stay* frames the exchange as economic in nature. Chudzian (2015) found that active users of sharing economy platforms were motivated by other benefits in the sharing economy, such as the social and psychological benefits available. Ma et al. (2019) similarly found that users of bike sharing platforms were significantly more driven by the pro-social hedonic benefits (e.g. helping others) on offer than the economic benefits. These two studies alluded to individuals preferring the social benefits over these economic ones.

Former literature around hospitality revealed that a surplus might be accumulated by one of the exchange partners (Mauss, 2002). This accumulation of benefits from these exchanges fits with a social exchange precept whereby individuals are motivated around the prospect of maximising from the exchange. However, an interesting dynamic emerged in these hospitality contexts where there was a maximisation of benefits. Individuals became generous in giving back more than they received (Lazzarato, 1997; Mauss, 2002). Mauss (2002) further found that that individuals who were being generous in these hospitality-type exchanges were still benefitting from the exchange by accumulating social recognition for their actions.

Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) showed that if the exchange transaction is economic in nature, the more beneficial outcome that emerges would be an economic relationship – not a social relationship. Similarly, if the exchange transaction is social in nature, the more beneficial outcome that emerges would be a social relationship – and not an economic relationship.

Reducing the Couchsurfing relationship to its tangible or economic benefits could be misleading and reductionist (e.g. Harvey et al., 2014) because it potentially misses out on the social benefits present when individuals reciprocate (e.g. Geiger et al., 2018; Kozinets, 2002; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). This required the focus of the research to be placed the social benefits of the social exchange, even though there would still be an exchange of tangible or economic benefits available during the Couchsurfing exchange. Through this refinement, it was anticipated that it would become clearer how both the host and the guest benefitted from the relationship – and even how both maximised their gains.

Identifying the social benefits and the outcomes of the relationship could also give insight into the subjective experience of these social benefits (e.g. Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976) and how they were maximising their gains from the exchange. Therefore, a brief overview of the social benefits previously found in the sharing economy and Couchsurfing have been discussed below.

2.5.3.1. Social benefits from participating in the sharing economy.

An often-overlooked aspect of the peer-to-peer sharing economy is that there have been social benefits for its users. The social benefits in the sharing economy were often side-lined to instead find support for the commercial value it offered people (e.g. Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Fitzmaurice et al., 2020; Guttentag, Smith, Potwarka & Havitz, 2018; Ma et al., 2019; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018; Sung et al., 2018; Wang & Nicolau, 2017; Zalega, 2018). Schor (2016) defended this position around validating the commercial value because the social landscape of the sharing economy was a given. Regardless, there is value in delving further into the social tenets of the sharing economy. Moving away from a monetary-based setting into a non-monetary based setting should help provide insight into the social nature of the

interaction as well as describing the social benefits that emerged from these relationships with peers or strangers.

From the onset, Botsman and Rogers (2010) recognised that there was a non-monetary sub-set of the sharing economy, namely collaborative lifestyle platforms. However, this view was skewed to believing that the interaction was still bound by the commercial proponents of trade and consumption. This meant that individuals chose to exchange scarce resources, like time, spaces, skills and experiences in the absence of a commodity like money. This same line of thinking continued to frame research in non-monetary settings (Harvey et al., 2014; Palgan et al., 2017). Until recently, there was little understanding of the essence that the reciprocal interaction brought among peers or strangers within the context of the sharing economy.

There has been growing support in the literature for people being motivated to participate in the sharing economy because of its many social benefits (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Benoit et al., 2017; Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Decrop et al., 2018; Fraanje & Spaargaren, 2019; Habibi et al., 2016; Hawlitschek et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Palgan et al., 2017; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018; Schaffner et al., 2018; Sung et al., 2018; Tsai & Kang, 2019; Wang et al., 2019). Among the social benefits found in the context of peers interacting with each other on various sharing economy platforms have been:

- A sense of belonging that these individuals felt by being part of a community (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Decrop et al., 2018; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018; Möhlmann, 2015);
- Meeting new people (Grybaitė & Stankevičienė, 2016; Guttentag et al., 2018; Hellwig et al., 2014);

- Gaining knowledge and perspective by learning from each other (Geiger et al., 2018; Hellwig et al., 2014; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020);
- Reducing loneliness (Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020);
- Strong social ties in the form of friendships or strong cross- cultural brotherhood that emerged from these interactions (Decrop et al., 2018; Dos Santos, Perazzolo, Pereira, & Baptista, 2017; Geiger et al., 2018; Lauterbach, Truong, Shah & Adamic, 2009; Kim et al., 2018; Palgan et al., 2017; Parigi et al., 2013; Parigi & State, 2014; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). Fraanje and Spaargaren (2019) summarised the social ties that formed between individuals as "neighbourliness";
- Social inclusion (Davlembayeva et al., 2019); and
- The enjoyment and fulfilment from having helped someone out (Hellwig et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2019; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020).

Couchsurfers have been found to also form strong social bonds during the interaction and develop friendships as a result (Geiger et al., 2018; Jung & Lee, 2017; Palgan et al., 2017; Parigi et al., 2013; Rosen et al., 2011; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). In addition, these social connections cut across diverse groups of people and cultures (Schuckert, Peters & Pilz, 2018). Couchsurfers have been connecting with locals to benefit by feeling a sense of belonging within the community (Rosen et al., 2011; Schuckert et al., 2018).

The ongoing reciprocal exchange that is reliant on social benefits has led towards individuals connecting further and becoming more committed during the social exchange (Sahlins, 1972; Cropanzano et al., 2017). Research in both the monetised and non-monetary forms of the sharing economy has corroborated this social exchange theoretical posit (Tsai & Kang, 2019; Wang et al., 2019). In one study, the benefits of social influencers (measured as

cleanliness ratings provided by one person to the other in the context of AirBnB) had a positive impact on the reciprocal exchange when using the platform whereas economic influencers (measured as price in the same context) had a negative impact on sustained reciprocity (Wang et al., 2019). Similarly, in non-monetary environments like online knowledge sharing, there was evidence that the perceived social benefits and the perceived community support influenced the decision and intention to reciprocate (Tsai & Kang, 2019).

The opportunity to form a social bond between interacting parties has not always been present across all peer-to-peer sharing economy platforms (Sung et al., 2018). Given the extent to which online social communities have emerged in recent years, the social bonds have become more superficial (Parigi & State, 2014). Parigi and State (2014) linked the superficiality of the social bonds to an erosion of the group identity that once existed in these sharing economy communities. As a result, Parigi and State (2014) speculated that as the community of those participating on the Couchsurfing platform would have grown and as technology would have made easier to connect, the members would have become "disenchanted" and the relationships would have become "less durable". Even when friendships formed as a result of the social bonds, these friendships have not lasted long – specifically in the context of Couchsurfing (Parigi & State, 2014). Regardless, the social bonds and friendships that Couchsurfers gain from the reciprocal interaction have been distinguished from other non-monetary, web-based only, sharing economy platforms (e.g. FaceBook, Wikipedia). The advantage of Couchsurfing interactions happening face-to-face has offered those interacting in this way more opportunity to enhance the social bond (Rosen et al., 2011).

Individuals participating in the sharing economy have found ways to interact responsibly with minimal rules and governance imposed by intermediating bodies (Gollnhofer et al., 2016;

Kim, Woo & Nam, 2018). The way individuals interact has been complicated by the governance that had been brought about by these intermediated digital platforms (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015; Ostrom, 1990). These digital platforms have benefits because they allow these individuals to find each other easily. However, these same platforms also carry limitations. Functions like a rating's system minimises the opportunity to form meaningful connections or long-term friendships (Frenken & Schor, 2017; Parigi & State, 2014; Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2015).

The rating's system has been used by participants of a platform to assess the goods, services, and experiences offered by the interacting counterpart. This same system also benefitted both interacting parties because it has facilitated trust prior to the engagement (Frenken & Schor, 2017; Richardson, 2015). There is another social benefit that has also emerged from the presence of rating's system. Schor et al. (2016) explained that the rating's system governs individuals because there is an opportunity to increase the social status and social capital in the community by receiving numerous positive reviews.

Even though research gives a sense of the sorts of social benefits available from these peer-to-peer interactions, there is limited understanding of how these social benefits fit with the reciprocal nature of the interaction. In other words, the literature has suggested that the prospect of someone getting reviewed by a peer could hinder the prospect of forming a longer-term friendship. However, this conclusion does not explain the lengths that someone would go to during the interaction to protect or enhance their social standing when they continue to engage with others via these peer-to-peer sharing economy platforms. There is a reason some of the earlier work by Parigi et al. (2013) found that individuals interacting in these non-monetary peer-to-peer environments have pursued opportunities to connect with someone that would end in a longer-term friendship. It was from this angle that this study aimed to find an understanding

around how the reciprocal nature of the interaction resulted individuals maximising their gain through these social benefits.

2.5.3.2. Other benefits from participating in the sharing economy.

Through the ongoing process of the reciprocal exchange, the social benefits were not the only sorts of benefits that were available to those interacting with each other. Hellwig et al. (2014) found that Couchsurfers benefitted by gaining new knowledge, improving self-worth, receiving self-validation, and experiencing a sense of fulfilment from helping others. There has also been evidence of other benefits that have arisen from the social nature of various sharing economy platforms. These included the benefits of:

- Authentic immersive local or cultural experiences (Casado-Diaz et al., 2020; Decrop et al., 2018; Geiger et al., 2018; Mahadevan, 2018; Paulauskaite et al., 2017; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020);
- Emancipation through self-expression (Kozinets, 2002);
- Hedonic experiences or hedonic value (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Botsman & Capelin, 2016; Hamari et al., 2016; Lawson et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2019; Schaffner et al., 2017);
- Protection and security (Heuman, 2005);
- Novelty (Guttentag et al., 2018; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020);
- Sustaining the environment by providing access to their resources for it to be used to its fullest capacity (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Hamari et al., 2016; Hawlitschek et al., 2018; Martin, 2016; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018); and

- The availability of sought-after goods in an organised manner (Fraanje & Spaargaren, 2019).

These other benefits from across studies have been linked to socio- demographic differences (Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Mahadevan, 2018; Zalega, 2018). This posed a necessary consideration when exploring these peer-to-peer sharing economy platforms, like Couchsurfing, which are globally- oriented. If individuals from different backgrounds would potentially seek different benefits within the sharing environment, this necessitated exploring this dynamic further in order to understand whether alternative benefits could suffice during the reciprocal exchange. Any truth to this premise would go against Cropanzano et al.'s (2017) postulation that individuals in a social exchange would seek social benefits to maximise their gain.

2.6. Conclusion of the Literature Review and the Research Questions

There has been no conclusive definition to set the context of what a sharing economy truly entails. The research scope was refined to understand the peer-to-peer behaviour of those participating in a non-monetary based sharing economy called Couchsurfing. This provided the ideal context to explore relevancy for social exchange theory to better understand the social interactions and the dynamics as found in Couchsurfing.

This research study broadly aimed to clarify the social nature of the Couchsurfing interaction and identify the outcomes from the Couchsurfing interaction. The reviewed literature provided context to reciprocity from a social exchange theory position. There have been indications that the reciprocal interaction between the host and the guest in a Couchsurfing social exchange have worked out to benefit both individuals involved in the exchange (Geiger et al., 2018; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). This mutually beneficial relationship, where exchange

partners have been supportive of each other, has been previously recognised in social exchange theory (Cook & Yamagishi, 1992; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Molm, 2010). This is also known as a collaborative interaction according to other sharing economy literature (Belk, 2014a, 2014b; Botsman & Roger, 2010).

In lieu of finding relevance for social exchange theory in Couchsurfing, it has not always been clear how the reciprocal exchange dynamics play out when there has been a concerted effort to collaborate and ensure that both parties have benefitted. This required that this research study provide more clarity on the reciprocal exchange dynamics in view of a possible collaborative style of reciprocity. Therefore, the first research question that emerged from social exchange theory relating to a non-monetary sharing economy called Couchsurfing has been positioned as:

Research question 1: How does the reciprocal nature of the interaction feature in Couchsurfing?

Those providing in the relationship have expectations of a reciprocal response, even if it has not been overtly communicated upfront (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017). There is another premise that a negotiated exchange, where expectations have been discussed ahead of the interaction, has not always led to a favourable ongoing reciprocal exchange and social bond developing between exchange partners (Blau, 1964, 1986; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). It has been unclear how these expectations were managed in former Couchsurfing studies (e.g. Geiger et al., 2018) despite evidence supporting that Couchsurfers have expectations of getting something back in return. Given the evidence around an ongoing exchange and stronger social connections forming after the Couchsurfing experience (e.g. Davlembeyeva et al., 2020; Geiger et al., 2018; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020), it could be speculated that expectations of a

reciprocal response remained unspecified during Couchsurfing. Although, the necessity for reciprocation has been stated on the website (Couchsurfing, 2020a). This study was interested in understanding how Couchsurfers navigated the necessity for a reciprocal exchange in view of their expectations, whether it remained unspecified or communicated upfront. Therefore, the second research question that emerged from social exchange theory relating to a non-monetary sharing economy called Couchsurfing has been positioned as:

Research question 2: What measures do Couchsurfers use to ensure that the interaction was reciprocal?

The one key challenge has been that the term sharing should not be equated to reciprocating according to sharing economy literature (e.g. Belk, 2010, 2014a). Sharing has been assumed to be an altruistic act where there has been no expectation of receiving something in return (Sahlins, 1972; Belk, 2014a). Social exchange theory has previously struggled to explain altruism because it has gone against the premises holding the theory together, for example, the expectations of a return (Blau, 1964) or the motivation and dependencies on each other to continue the social exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Davlembayeva et al., 2020). There has been evidence to suggest that the idea of Couchsurfers behaving in an altruistic manner is impractical during a Couchsurfing exchange (e.g. Benoit et al., 2017; Davlembayeva et al., 2020; Geiger et al., 2018). The continued lack of support towards an altruistic type behaviour evident in Couchsurfing has not meant that it should be completely ignored. Instead, the research offered an opportunity to explore the prospect of altruism existing and what it would mean for social exchange theory. Therefore, the third research question that emerged from social exchange theory relating to a non-monetary sharing economy called Couchsurfing has been positioned as:

Research question 3: How would altruism affect the social nature of the Couchsurfing interaction?

Social exchange theory suggested that individuals are motivated to engage with another individual because of the opportunity to maximise benefits during the exchange (Blau, 1964; Ekeh, 1974; Li, 2015; Molm, 1990, 2010; Stafford, 2008). Individuals have continued to participate in the reciprocal exchange for as long as there has been a benefit for them during the interaction. There needs to be an outcome that benefits both individuals in the relationship (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Lamberton, 2015; Sahlins, 1972). Otherwise, when it has not been beneficial to both, this has led towards an imbalance of power in the relationship (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017). A reciprocal exchange that is motivated by the social benefits is best when the interaction has been socially- oriented (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Couchsurfing offers such an environment where the exchange dynamics are socially driven (Davlembayeva et al., 2020; Benoit et al., 2017; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). While social benefits have been available to Couchsurfers (e.g. Geiger et al., 2018; Parigi et al., 2013), it remained to be seen whether the reciprocal nature of the interaction resulted in Couchsurfers maximising their gains through these social benefits – or potentially other benefits because of demographic differences (Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Mahadevan, 2018; Zalega, 2018). The exploration of these social benefits in this research study provided an opportunity to explain the subjective experience of these social benefits and how both Couchsurfers during the interaction were maximising their gains. Therefore, the fourth research question that emerged from social exchange theory relating to a non-monetary sharing economy called Couchsurfing has been positioned as:

Research question 4: How do both individuals in the reciprocal exchange maximise their rewards?

3. Methods

This study necessitated an exploratory research approach because of the limited amount of research available to understand and describe the social nature and the outcomes from the social nature of the interaction in a non-monetary sharing economy – namely Couchsurfing. A phenomenological research methodology was adopted during the investigation. This phenomenological exploration also involved enhancing the lived experiences by having the researcher immerse in the social context under question. Thereafter, a thematic interpretation of the interviews and documented behaviour in this sharing economy was guided by Braun and Clarke (2006). This chapter expands on these choices made regarding the research methods.

3.1. Research Paradigm

The ontological basis of this study fits within an interpretative-constructivist research paradigm because the research questions indicated a need for inter-subjective experiences between the researcher and the respondents in order to co-create understanding of personal accounts of their social actions (Bryman, 2012; Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012; Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Furthermore, the co-creation of these personal account would ensure that multiple social realities came to the fore (Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012; Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

The epistemology of this paradigm acknowledges that the social context is laden with subjective experiences and meaning that is both historical and contextual (Bryman, 2012; Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012; Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). This required the researcher to remain close to the social realities of the respondents. In this way, the reconstruction and interpretation of these personal accounts became clearer through having co-

created the social realities, having reflected on the meaning of the social context, and having spent time as an active participant in the social context (Creswell, 2007). Thereby, the researcher reconstructed the social realities as was evidenced through the multiple voices (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

The researcher also recognised that the process of investigation was emergent and required self-reflection. More so, there were shifts that took place both in the research design and the subjective biases (Creswell, 2007; Creswell, 2009). These shifts affected the research approach and the subjective biases were documented. The purpose of this was to provide an axiological portrayal of personal values and biases that were present throughout the process and how these impacted the nature of investigation in the social context of Couchsurfing.

In summary, the interpretative-constructivist paradigm had not allowed for a pre-defined set of variables that were under study. Rather, when exploring the phenomena being researched, there was an appreciation for both the researcher and the respondent to generate shared meaning and understanding of the social context.

3.2. Research Design

Being a qualitative research study, a phenomenological strategy of inquiry was followed. This involved exploring recollected events relating to social interactions and behaviour as the respondents experienced it in the context of Couchsurfing. The fundamental nature of a phenomenological inquiry has recognised the importance of bringing the perceptions of the lived experience to the fore (Creswell, 2007; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Zahavi, 2003).

There were additional benefits of using a phenomenological design. The interpretive nature allowed for deeper understanding of phenomena. These phenomena were laden with subjective experiences and the purpose of the researcher was to derive an understanding through extrapolation and meaning (Creswell, 2007; Guest et al., 2012). The subjective interpretation was enhanced by studying multiple people that had a shared experience relating to the phenomena under exploration (Creswell, 2007). In addition, an exploratory framework necessitated an openness to emerging constructs and themes not previously scoped out. These previously undefined, emergent constructs assisted in bringing an understanding to the relative relationship between the social nature of the interaction and the outcomes from the social nature of the interaction.

The limitation of using phenomenology could have led to over-interpretation of the subjective lived experiences (Guest et al., 2012). To minimise over-interpretation, the researcher included an ethnographic immersive research procedure as a secondary fieldwork component to supplement the interpreted understanding of the lived experiences in the social context of this current study. Ethnographies have been used in sociological and anthropological studies in order to understand cultural phenomena and social interactions from the standpoint of the subject whereby the researcher has immersed themselves and observed the society or culture (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Malinowski, 1922; Sanjek, 2002).

The advantage of leveraging an immersive research approach to accompany the interview process was to not only study what Couchsurfing participants had said but also what they had done (Packer, 2011). The addition of this strategy of inquiry allowed for descriptions, interpretations, understanding, reflections and shaping of contextual actions throughout the

research process (Tedlock, 2000, 2011). In this way, there would be rich descriptions from research findings that related to the research questions.

Creswell (2009) acknowledges that qualitative research has been about using multiple sources of data – even if some of those sources of data originated from different philosophical lenses. Having stated this, the additional immersive research procedure still ensured that the interpretation of the social actions was subjective and remained in an interpretative-constructivist paradigm (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2001; Guest et al., 2012). This meant that the interviews were key to the inductive data analysis (Creswell, 2007). Meanwhile, the immersive experience augmented the input into the types of questions asked during the interviews and the interpretation of the data from the interview process.

People's understanding of their social context could have been influenced by their experiences relating to discussions present in the mass media, such as the negative publicity relating to many of the different sharing economy platforms (e.g. Andruss, 2015; Malhorta & van Alstyle, 2014; Rosen et al., 2011) or the regulatory debate (e.g. Bassett, 2014; Chang, 2014; Gobble, 2015; Malhotra & Van Alstyne 2014; Thakali & Naik, 2015). Therefore, another advantage of a dual approach was to overcome this obstacle. By using participant observations and descriptions of their behaviour in the social context to inform the depth of the discussion during the interview process minimised recollection biases (see Kahneman & Riis, 2005; Kahneman, 2011). Thus, the interview process was not only having people recall from distant experiences, but the observed behaviour was also under investigation.

The exploratory nature of the study predetermined that there was an appreciation for the research process being emergent (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2009). Creswell (2007) acknowledged that these multiple social realities were reliant on an evolving intellect for both

researcher and research participant. This meant that that there is allowance for constructs to shift as either individual becomes more informed.

3.3. Research aims and scope

A phenomenological approach requires an open, less constructed scope for inquiry (Moustakas, 1994; Zahavi, 2003). This research approach still required refinement in order to determine the social interaction under study. In order to limit the exploratory scope of the research, there were four research aims that refined the focus of the study:

- To understand the social nature of the interaction in Couchsurfing by clarifying the reciprocal dynamics;
- To explore measures that Couchsurfers used to ensure that the interaction was reciprocal;
- To determine whether altruism affected the social nature of the Couchsurfing interaction;
- To understand how both individuals in the exchange maximised their benefits.

The social context under exploration was specific to those familiar with the Couchsurfing. More specifically, the research was interested in those who had been actively engaging on the Couchsurfing platform either as a host and/or as a guest.

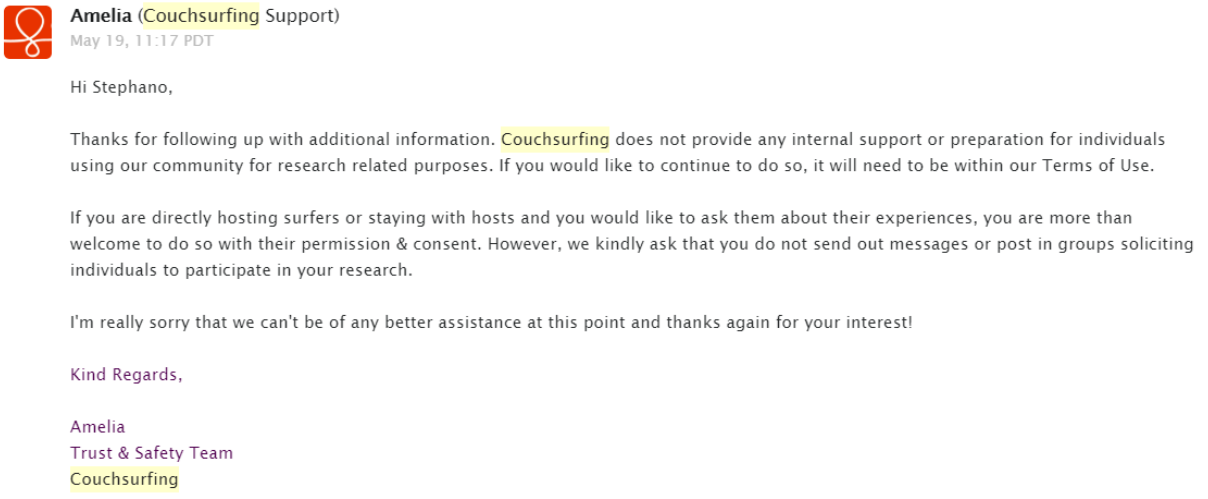
3.4. Sampling procedure

A non-probability convenience sampling method was used to select participants (De Vos, Delport, Fouche & Strydom, 2011; Taherdoost, 2016). This involved selecting participants based on being accessible, available, and voluntarily willing to participate in the research (De Vos et

al., 2011; Taherdoost, 2016). The choice for using this sampling method and the procedure of applying convenience sampling has been detailed below.

Permission for this current study was granted by Couchsurfing. The research aims and purpose of the research was stipulated in the request for permission (see Annexure 3, p.255). Permission came in two parts from Couchsurfing. The first response granted the researcher permission to use the already existing publicly accessible online content from the Couchsurfing platform (see Annexure 2: Permission from Couchsurfing Ordered Chronologically, p.252). The second response granted the researcher permission to approach Couchsurfers already hosting or being hosted by the researcher (see Figure 3.1, p.73).

Permission granted by Couchsurfing limited the method of inviting Couchsurfers to participate in the research (see Figure 3.1, p.73). The researcher was not allowed to send out solicited direct messages or group postings to encourage Couchsurfing members to participate in the research. Rather, Couchsurfing advised that these requests for participation in the research should only be done if the member was being hosted by the researcher or if the researcher was being hosted by a member.



Amelia (Couchsurfing Support)
May 19, 11:17 PDT

Hi Stephano,

Thanks for following up with additional information. Couchsurfing does not provide any internal support or preparation for individuals using our community for research related purposes. If you would like to continue to do so, it will need to be within our Terms of Use.

If you are directly hosting surfers or staying with hosts and you would like to ask them about their experiences, you are more than welcome to do so with their permission & consent. However, we kindly ask that you do not send out messages or post in groups soliciting individuals to participate in your research.

I'm really sorry that we can't be of any better assistance at this point and thanks again for your interest!

Kind Regards,

Amelia
Trust & Safety Team
Couchsurfing

Figure 3.1: Conditional permission granted for the research by Couchsurfing.

The approach from the start was for the researcher to continue using Couchsurfing as he had always been doing prior to the research study. The researcher set his Couchsurfing profile on "Accepting Guests". This indicated to the community that this member was willing to host fellow Couchsurfers. "Accepting Guests" is one of four settings that an individual can set on their online profile. The other three settings would indicate "Maybe Accepting Guests", "Not Accepting Guests", or "Want to Meet Up".

3.4.1. Primary sampling procedure.

The initial participants of the research either sent a request to stay with the researcher or they put up a public trip request whereby they were looking for a host. The researcher would always respond to requests first-and-foremost as an active member of Couchsurfing. The position of the research study was secondary. It must be noted that during the first few requests from Couchsurfers, the researcher delayed the positioning of the research study after initial acceptance of the Couchsurfing request or even during their stay. The reason for this was because the researcher did not want to pre-empt the reciprocal nature of the Couchsurfing

interaction. In other words, the researcher did not want it to come across that the respondents were doing the researcher a favour by participating in the research and receiving a *free* place to stay in return. The researcher also felt that the purpose of being a host was to respond to a request without suggesting any expectation of getting something in return.

The positioning used to invite participants to the study and reminded the guests that they were under no obligation to participate in the study and their participation was voluntary. It must be noted that the researcher continued to host or be hosted by other Couchsurfers. However, only those Couchsurfing hosts or guests who agreed to participate in the study were included in the sample. Any written or verbal consent to participate in the research based on the positioning of the research in Couchsurfing message was only an indication to the researcher whether to send the participant information sheet. The participant information sheet (see Annexure 4: Participant Information Sheet, p.259) was sent to the individuals through WhatsApp or email after confirmation of the Couchsurfing request and some communication on the Couchsurfing messaging app. The participation of the individual was only formally confirmed the participant signed the inform consent form (see Annexure 5: Informed Consent Form, p.262) and a consent form to audio-record the interview (see Annexure 6: Consent Form to Audio Record the Interview, p.265). Even though no one declined to participate in the research, the researcher would have respected their choice and continued to host the guest regardless and without prejudice.

The original intention of the sampling method was to limit the sample to specific demographic profiles (e.g. age, gender, nationality, education levels, level of experience using Couchsurfing). It was evidently difficult to apply purposive quotas at any stage of the research given that the researcher was uncertain about the regularity and type of guests that would request to stay at his place of residence – and then still get affirmation that they wanted to participate in

the research. More so, hosting was an exhausting process which determined the regularity of hosting to at most 4 individuals in one month.

3.4.2. Additional sampling procedures to increase the sample.

As the fieldwork period continued, the number of requests to host individuals were not frequent enough. Therefore, the researcher chose to boost the sample where Couchsurfers were invited to participate in the research based on the following criteria:

- If they previously stayed with the researcher as a Couchsurfing guest before the research study commenced (then being a host);
- when the researcher (participating as a guest) requested to stay at another host;
- when someone wanted to hang out or meet up; or
- whereby individuals (members of Couchsurfing) learned about the research study in conversation.

There was a similar approach around informing these individuals about the research. They were notified about the opportunity to participate in the research via WhatsApp, Messenger, email or in person (see Table 3.1, p.79). After receiving their written or verbal consent to participate in the research based on an initial positioning of the research, the researcher sent the participant information sheet, the inform consent form (see Annexure 5: Informed Consent Form, p.262) and a consent form to audio-record (see Annexure 6: Consent Form to Audio Record the Interview, p.265). Again, participation was voluntary. After receiving the signed consent forms back, a date was selected for the interview. All participants were reminded of their anonymity throughout the research process and that their identity would not be disclosed to anyone else.

3.4.3. Sample overview.

The convenience sampling approach was refined towards selecting users of the Couchsurfing platform, who were over the age of 18 years as well as being fluent in speaking and understanding English. A total of **19 participants** consented to take part in the research. The majority of participants were skewed towards being male (i.e. n=15 males and n=4 females) and most had a university undergraduate or postgraduate degree (i.e. n=12). In addition, there were 16 participants who had a Couchsurfing experience with the researcher during the fieldwork process and 3 participants who also had a Couchsurfing experience with the researcher prior to this current study. The sample was also skewed towards those who had been a Couchsurfing guest of the researcher (i.e. n=14), as opposed to hosting the researcher (i.e. n=3[1]) or hanging out with the researcher (i.e. n=4[2]).

All 19 participants formed part of the in-depth interview process. In addition, their online profile information and any online communication with this participant were collected. Of these, field observation notes and reflexive diary entries were only documented for 14 participants, who were hosted by the researcher or when the researcher stayed with them. A full detailed account each participant as part of the sample is tabulated in Table 3.1.

A qualitative research design does not pre-define a minimum sample that determines reliability or validity (De Vos et al., 2011; Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow & Ponterotto, 2017). If anything, the research paradigm determined the sufficiency of the sample in this qualitative study (Boddy, 2016). Given this qualitative investigation followed an interpretative-

[1] n=1 is also counted in guest tally because the researcher had the opportunity to host the individual and stay with the individual as a guest

[2] n=1 is also counted in host tally because he was both a host and initially had a Couchsurfing hang-out experience with the researcher

constructivist paradigm, there was greater reliance on data saturation. The sample achieved was reflective of reaching saturation when there were repeat situations that came to the fore (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Mason 2010). Repeat situations had not meant homogeneity of the data. Rather it was about comprehensively capturing the "essence" of a variety of themes and insights in the research (Creswell, 2007; Levitt et al., 2017). This required the sample to also include cases that were contrary or negated emerging themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Creswell, 2009; Smith, 2011a). Under these measures, the sample achieved in this study was considered sufficient to inductively derive the "essence" of the inferences represented in the analysis.

Table 3.1

Sample Breakdown

Respondent ID	Gender	Age	Nationality	Level of education	Role	Period when participants were informed about the research (Method used to inform participants)	Informed consent form	Date of Couchsurfing Experience	Date of Interview	In-depth Interview	Reflexive Diary & Field Observation Notes	Online Profile & Communi-cation Analysis
P01/G/DS/M	M	30	France	Masters	Guest	After stay (WhatsApp)	Yes	20 – 21 Nov 2017	24 Mar 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes
P02/H/DS/F	F	55	South Africa	Unknown	Host	Before stay (During CS communication)	Yes	4 – 6 Dec 2017	2 Mar 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes
P03/G/PS/M	M	55	New Zealand	Post-doctoral (Professor)	Guest	Direct contact (Messenger)	Yes	Pre-Study 11 – 13 Jan 2015	24 Mar 2018	Yes	No	Yes
P04/G/PS/M	M	23	Germany	Undergraduate	Guest	Direct contact (WhatsApp)	Yes	Pre-Study 6 – 9 Nov 2015	24 Mar 2018	Yes	No	Yes
P05/HO/DS/M	M	32	South Africa	Masters	Hang-out	Before hang-out (Verbal)	Yes	26 Mar 2018 (meet-up for interview)	26 Mar 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes
P06/HO/DS/M	M	29	South Africa	Masters	Hang-out	Before hang-out (Verbal)	Yes	26 Mar 2018 (meet-up for interview)	26 Mar 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes
P07/HO&H/DS/M	M	28	Iran	PhD Candidate	Hang-out & Host	Before hang-out (During CS communication)	Yes	29 Mar 2018 (hang-out) Visited him in Iran in 10-11 Sept 2018	4 May 2018	Yes	No	Yes
P08/G&H/PS/M	M	41	USA	Post-graduate	Guest & Host	During visit to SA	Yes	Pre-study Original 4 – 7 Mar 2015 & 4 – 8 Sept 2015	31 May 2018 (During visit to SA and staying at my place again)	Yes	No	Yes
P09/G/DS/M	M	32	Denmark	Masters	Guest	Before stay (During CS communication)	Yes	8 – 10 Jun 2018	10 Jun 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes
P10/G/DS/M	M	30	USA	Undergraduate	Guest	Before stay (During CS communication)	Yes	14 – 18 Jun 2018	17 Jun 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes
P11/G/DS/M	M	27	Belgium	Undergraduate	Guest	During stay (Verbal)	Yes	18 – 21 Jun 2018	24 Jun 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes
P12/G/DS/F	F	25	Belgium	Undergraduate	Guest	During stay (Verbal)	Yes	18 – 21 Jun 2018	24 Jun 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes
P13/G/DS/F	F	29	Canada	Unknown	Guest	Before stay (During CS communication)	Yes	15 – 22 Jul 2018	20 Jul 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes

P14/G/DS/M	M	20	Hong Kong	Undergraduate	Guest	Before stay (During CS communication)	Yes	28 – 30 Jul 2018	29 Jul 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes
P15/G/DS/M	M	33	France	Post-graduate	Guest	Before stay (During CS communication)	Yes	15 – 17 Aug 2018	16 Aug 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes
P16/G/DS/M	M	32	Belgium	Masters	Guest	Before stay (During CS communication)	Yes	21 – 25 Oct 2018	26 Oct 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes
P17/HO/DS/M	M	36	Singapore	Unknown	Hang-out	Before hang-out (During CS communication)	Yes	3 Nov 2018	3 Nov 2018	Yes	No	Yes
P18/G/DS/M	M	29	Spain	Unknown	Guest	During stay (Verbal)	Yes	27 – 29 Nov 2018	29 Nov 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes
P19/G/DS/F	F	27	Spain	Unknown	Guest	During stay (Verbal)	Yes	27 – 29 Nov 2018	29 Nov 2018	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note. The respondent ID pseudonym can be interpreted in the following way: G = Guest; H = Host; HO = Hang-out; DS = Couchsurfing experience during study; PS = Couchsurfing experience before the study; M = Male; F = Female. The gender column can be interpreted in the following way: M = Male; F = Female

3.4.4. Rationale for the data collection and data analysis approach

This study followed an exploratory, inductive data collection and analysis approach. This was done for three reasons:

1. At the time of commencing the fieldwork, the literature around the sharing economy was not conclusive to suggest that the interactions in Couchsurfing were reciprocal or related to social exchange theory. More clarity around social behaviour in the sharing economy became available post-2018.
2. A possible opportunity when refining the focus of this study to "Couchsurfing" could have also considered the existing literature associated with "hospitality" and social exchange theory (e.g. Lashley, 2013). Despite this limitation, the foundation of Couchsurfing was grounded in a sub-type sharing economy called the accommodation-based sharing economy (e.g. Palgan et al., 2017; Sung et al., 2018) or non-monetary sharing economy (e.g. Gollnhofer et al., 2016; Gyimóthy & Dredge, 2017; Hardy, 2017; Mittendorf, 2017). To assume an association with "hospitality" might have been pre-mature when the literature on sharing economy platforms continued to define the context of Couchsurfing economically from a bartering stand-point and not necessarily as a hospitality-based platform of social exchange (e.g. Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Benoit et al., 2017; Hamari et al., 2016; Hawlitschek et al., 2018; Hellwig et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2018; Kramer, 2016; Sordi et al., 2018; Zalega, 2018).
3. This study was seeking to clarify social interactions in a sharing economy. The literature alluded to "sharing" as the form of social behaviour found in Couchsurfing (e.g. Belk, 2010; Geiger et al., 2018). Yet from a social psychology

theoretical perspective (e.g. social exchange theory), it was not conclusive whether "sharing" was altruistic or collaborative. A qualitative explorative, inductive approach. Offered the opportunity to explore these social relationships.

3.4.5. Data collection and data recording procedures.

Access to the Couchsurfing community was gained through the researcher's current membership and activity with Couchsurfing. The researcher had been a member of Couchsurfing for 6 years prior to the commencement of the data collection procedure – having stayed with seven (7) other Couchsurfers as a guest and having hosted twenty-eight (28) other Couchsurfers as a host. The existing membership and extensive activity in the community allowed the researcher to enhance both trust and rapport with the community (Kawuluch, 2012; McGrath, Palgren & Lilijedahl, 2018). Furthermore, being an existing Couchsurfing member enabled collecting participant observation data during the immersive, lived experiences when staying with Couchsurfers or hosting them.

As explained in the sampling procedure, Couchsurfers were either informed about the research study in the communication preceding them hosting the researcher, before the researcher hosted them, during a verbal conversation when they were being hosted, or after having been a former guest of the researcher. At the point of receiving the participant information sheet and then again when signing the informed consent forms, participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary. These participants were also assured of anonymity and that pseudonyms would be used for reporting purposes (see Table 3.1, p.79). Furthermore, they were also assured that all information collected from them was being treated confidentially.

The primary method of the data collection procedure was the in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2007). In addition to this, there was an additional qualitative method applied as part of the data collection process to inform the interviews, namely autoethnography (i.e. from the immersive experiences captured in the form of a reflexive diary).

There was an immersive experience with 14 individuals. These individuals either hosted the researcher, were hosted by the researcher, or chose to spend the day (i.e. hang-out) with the researcher during the fieldwork process. For 12 of these Couchsurfers, the in-depth interviews took place during the Couchsurfing experience. Table 3.1 shows that the interview took place after the Couchsurfing experience only for the first two participant. There were also 5 participants that stayed with the researcher prior to the research. There were no reflexive notes for these individuals from when they had previously stayed with the researcher as a Couchsurfer. As such, their main source of data collection was through the in-depth interviews.

Regardless of the procedure of data collection, from the onset, the researcher established rapport with the research participants (Kawuluch, 2012; McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2016). The purpose of building rapport was to ensure trust, familiarity and eventually enabling enough "essence" to emerge during the interview phase (Creswell, 2007; De Vos et al., 2011; LeCompte, 1999; McGrath et al., 2016). There were two critical moments where there was an emphasis on building rapport with the participants. The first happened when the researcher and the Couchsurfer were interacting via one of the many communication channels before meeting in person (this took place via the messaging system on the Couchsurfing website for most participants who has a Couchsurfing experience with the researcher during the fieldwork period). The second happened again just before the in-depth interview process. Building rapport at this latter stage was to reinforce comfort, show interest, and enable the depth of conversation

required. During both moments of building rapport, participation in the study was always positioned as voluntary and anything they stated throughout the process remained confidential and anonymous.

The next two sections provide a detailed overview of each data collection process. The first section discusses the in-depth interviews because it was the primary data collection source. Even though there was an immersive, autoethnographic approach to the data collection, this has been discussed after the in-depth interview section. It is worth noting that the immersive experiences were conducted before the in-depth interviews took place. For each section, there is a brief overview of the literature that informed the procedure and the methods used to during this process.

3.4.6. In-depth Interviews.

The in-depth interviews formed a key component of data collection in a phenomenological research design because it generated a deeper understanding of the "why's", "how's" and "what's" of both the recollected Couchsurfing experiences (Given, 2008; Morris, 2015) and the observed behaviour of the research participants (Hamera, 2011).

Building rapport and gaining the trust from the participants was essential (Creswell, 2007; Kawuluch, 2012; McGrath, Palgren & Lilijedahl, 2018; Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999;). The researcher followed a few rapport building guidelines before each interview (Schensul et al., 1999):

- Ensured the participant chose the interview location and time (or consented to the interview location and time if suggested by the researcher)

- Reminded them that the interview was voluntary, and they could opt out at any time (even if several months had passed since the interview)
- Confirmed anonymity and confidentiality as stipulated in the participant information sheet
- Ensured that the informed consent forms were signed (this included the request to grant the researcher permission to audio record the interview)
- Reiterated how their views added value to the research
- Engaged in small talk just before the interview was about to commence to instil comfort
- Maintained the participant's comfort throughout the interview by verbally checking with the person whether they felt at ease – especially when the audio recorder was placed in front of the participant and the recording commenced

These in-depth interviews were usually scheduled towards the end or after the Couchsurfing experience. This gave individuals an opportunity to reflect on their behaviour or recall previous social interactions when hosting or staying with other Couchsurfers.

The difficulty experienced in the field was that while there were opportunities to get to know each other through continuous 'as-and-when' conversations, the in-depth interview process would re-ask some of those questions that might have already been known to the researcher. The purpose of this was to ensure the consistency of the interview process as the primary means of data collection and analysis. More so, to ensure that the research stayed true to the paradigm, this was also seen as a way to collaborate and reconstruct the social realities of the participants (Bryman, 2012; Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012; Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

It is worth mentioning that the role of researcher became more evident to the participants during the interview process. Previous to this, the social interactions were as Couchsurfing members – fulfilling the roles of host or guest. It seemed like the participants saw the researcher as separate or different to the Couchsurfer. There were several examples of this during the interview process. For example, the participant would speak about the host in third person or the questions were answered in a more formal way compared to how they would have addressed it in the Couchsurfing environment. The formality of answering questions could be a result of questions being one-sided as opposed to conversational and curiosity expressed from both sides.

Each in-depth interview entailed a face-to-face, one-on-one in-person or online video interview (see Table 3.2, p.88). A semi-structured interview process was adopted for these in-depth interviews (Longhurst, 2003). This involved setting out a discussion guide before the fieldwork commenced (see Annexure 7: Discussion Guide for Semi-Structured Interviews, p.267).

The structure of the discussion guide was split into four sections:

- The cover page for the guide contained questions pertaining to the main research questions as well as additional questions that emerged during the proposal stage.
- A biographical introduction made up the first section of questions and it served two purposes. Firstly, it built rapport in positioning non-threatening questions that would normally have surfaced prior to the interview (for example, upon first meeting the Couchsurfer). The second purpose was to give participants the opportunity to include historically relevant information that could benefit the interpretive analysis process when trying to understand their participation in the Couchsurfing environment. This was in line with reconstructing historical accounts that might have influenced the experiences that these individuals

recollected or displayed in their social world (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

- The second section of the guide was centred around the Couchsurfing journey of the participant. The purpose of this section was to understand their introduction to the platform, expectations (if any) relating to their participation as a Couchsurfing member, and where they currently stood within the community.
- The last section of the guide focused on Couchsurfing interactions – whereby the participant was encouraged to recall experiences that were positive and negative. In addition, this section also afforded the researcher an opportunity to clarify any observations relating to their recent Couchsurfing experience.

The interviewer was not restricted to only asking the questions as stated in the discussion guide nor did the researcher need to follow the exact question as it was phrased in the guide. Rather, the flow of the interview was assisted by having a few structured questions in the guide (Given, 2008, Longhurst, 2003; Morris, 2015). Additional questions were introduced based on some of the narratives that emerged during the interview or based on some of the participant observation notes. This approach provided further insight in terms of how these individuals make sense of their own perceived reality (Chase, 2011; Tedlock, 2011). All questions posed to the respondents were open-ended and additional probing followed suit. The additional probes followed a ladder technique to clarify the responses and ultimately assist in the interpretation of the data (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988; Veludo-de-Oliveira, Ikeda & Campomar, 2006).

All interviews were conducted by the researcher. Each semi-structured in-depth interview was recorded on a portable Olympus DM-901 digital voice recorder. For the face-to-face interviews, the digital audio recording device was placed close enough to the participant but also

at a distance that ensured comfort. Despite some of the interviews taking place via an online video streaming service (i.e. Skype), these sessions were not video recorded. Only the audio was recorded on the device indicated previously. Each in-depth interview differed in length and was determined rather by how much each respondent was willing to share. On average each interview took about 51 minutes and 38 seconds – with the shortest interview being 11 minutes and 13 seconds, and the longest interview being 2 hours 1 minute and 33 seconds. A brief summary of the length of each interview is in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2
In-depth interview structure and length

Respondent ID	Date of Interview	In-person OR online video one-on-one, face-to-face interview	Length of In-depth Interview
P01/G/DS/M	24 Mar 2018	Online video	00:35:12
P02/H/DS/F	2 Mar 2018	Face-to-face	00:55:18
P03/G/PS/M	24 Mar 2018	Online video	00:48:16
P04/G/PS/M	24 Mar 2018	Online video	00:45:50
P05/HO/DS/M & P06/HO/DS/M	26 Mar 2018	Face-to-face	01:05:02
P07/HO&H/DS/M	4 May 2018	Online video	00:44:10
P08/G&H/PS/M	31 May 2018	Face-to-face	01:03:20
P09/G/DS/M	10 Jun 2018	Face-to-face	01:10:14
P10/G/DS/M	17 Jun 2018	Face-to-face	02:01:33
P11/G/DS/M & P12/G/DS/F	24 Jun 2018	Face-to-face	00:11:13
P13/G/DS/F	20 Jul 2018	Face-to-face	00:32:40
P14/G/DS/M	29 Jul 2018	Face-to-face	00:27:41
P15/G/DS/M	16 Aug 2018	Face-to-face	01:30:15
P16/G/DS/M	26 Oct 2018	Face-to-face	01:01:28
P17/HO/DS/M	3 Nov 2018	Face-to-face	00:33:33
P18/G/DS/M & P19/G/DS/F	29 Nov 2018	Face-to-face	00:20:20
P01/G/DS/M	24 Mar 2018	Online video	00:35:12
Average time of each interview			00:51:38

The open-ended questions also gave participants an opportunity to narrate their own stories and tell their lived experiences (Chase, 2011; Tedlock, 2011). Through this narrative

technique, participants recounted events and offered detailed accounts of their personal experiences.

These audio recordings from each interview were transcribed for analysis purposes. The researcher transcribed every audio recording with the assistance of two website-based transcribing tools. The reason for the choice of these two online transcription tools was because OTranscribe[3] and Transcribe by Wreally[4] were recommended by several academics on ResearchGate (https://www.researchgate.net/post/What_is_the_best_software_for_transcription_of_interviews2).

Transcribe by Wreally, an auto-transcribe tool, was used to speed up the transcription process (see Table 3.3, p.90). The audio files from the in-depth interviews were uploaded to Transcribe by Wreally. The auto-transcribe software would convert the audio to text. Once the entire audio was transcribed, the text was copied into a Microsoft Word document. Thereafter, a quality assessment of each transcript was conducted by the researcher. The quality of the transcribed output was not optimal and thus, the researcher made use of another freeware online tool called OTranscribe to go through the transcript and edit it. The reason the researcher used OTranscribe in addition to Transcribe by Wreally was because the audio quality on OTranscribe was more comprehendible and clearer than what Transcribe by Wreally offered.

To ensure ethical considerations were accounted for when using the software, both websites offered assurances of the confidentiality relating to the audio files that were uploaded (see Table 3.3, p.90). OTranscribe does not store any of the uploaded content or transcript edits

[3] https://otranscribe.com
[4] https://transcribe.wreally.com/

on a cloud or external server. Therefore, this platform ensured that all ethical concerns were addressed. The offering by Transcribe by Wreally initially generated some concerns around the ethics of storing the audio files, despite the content being encrypted. For each audio file uploaded, it was encrypted and stored on their server so that the machine learning capability could improve the quality of the auto-transcribe function. The conversation to the ethics committee regarding this possible ethical dilemma is included in Annexure 10: Email Trail of Consultation with Representative from Wits HREC Ethics Committee using Online Transcription Services (see p.273).

Table 3.3

Summary of the transcription process

Step	Description of transcription process	Tool used and confidentiality of audio-recording	Pertaining to the confidentiality of audio recording
Step 1	Uploaded the audio file to be auto-transcribed	Transcribe by Wreally https://transcribe.wreally.com/	Confidentiality clause on website (Transcribe by Wreally, 2019): *"Unlike the Transcribe audio player, the file that you choose here will be uploaded to our servers, since we need to do the speech recognition on our servers. Rest assured that we use industry-standard encryption protocols to securely upload & process your files."*
Step 2	Took the converted audio-to-text transcript from Transcribe by Wreally and used OTranscribe to verify and edit the converted text file. Once again, the researcher needed to upload the audio file to follow the recorded conversation and edited the transcript where necessary.	OTranscribe https://otranscribe.com/	Assurance of where the data is stored (OTranscribe, 2019): *"oTranscribe is designed in a way that your data (both the audio file and the written transcript) never leaves your local computer. The transcript is not kept on a remote server or "in the cloud", but is instead in the browser's local storage. The downside is that it is not possible to access your saved transcripts from another computer."*

3.4.7. Autoethnography

Ethnographies assist in describing, investigating, and experiencing the social setting under study to represent the social actions and derive the subjective meaning associated with these actions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Emerson et al., 2001). Autoethnography is form of ethnography research where the researcher describes their own interpretation and experiences of the events being studied (Allen, 2017; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). The autoethnographic data collection method involved an immersive, ethnographic experience. More specifically, the immersive experience was positioned from the perspective and reflective views of the researcher which positioned the research approach more in line with autoethnographic research.

The researcher adopted a fully active, emic role during the immersive experience. This allowed the participants of the research to continue to go about their usual routine when using the Couchsurfing platform. By taking on the role of the active participant (i.e. member of Couchsurfing either as host or guest), this ensured that the research participants were not intimidated and felt like they were constantly under scrutiny. More so, the researcher (in his role as host or guest) also continued to go about the typical way of engaging with other Couchsurfers when hosting or surfing.

The researcher engaged in the Couchsurfing community both as a host and a guest. The researcher tried to keep the Couchsurfing engagements during this study the same as those Couchsurfing engagements that preceded the study. This was to ensure that the Couchsurfing experiences were more natural. The main difference between the study and prior to the study was that there was an intention to be more reflective of the behaviour of other Couchsurfers and of the self in this environment. These mindful reflections ensured that the active role by the

researcher in this familiar community minimised the prospect of classifying the immersive experience as "backyard research" (Creswell, 2009; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

This active role in Couchsurfing involved the researcher immersing themselves in their actual environment over an extended period of time. The time frame of the fieldwork ran from 22 October 2017 to 9 January 2019. This was a total of **15 months**, of which 12 months were also spent actively collecting data as permitted by the respondents (see Annexure 4: Participant Information Sheet, p.259). The length of the Couchsurfing experience differed for each participant. Each immersive experience as either host, guest or during a hang-out was an average the length of **3 days and 2 nights**. This is detailed in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4

Duration of each Couchsurfing experience that informed the participant observations

Respondent ID	Role	Date of Couchsurfing Experience	Duration of Couchsurfing experience
P01/G/DS/M	Guest	20 – 21 Nov 2017	2 days, 1 night
P02/H/DS/F	Host	4 – 6 Dec 2017	3 days, 2 nights
P05/HO/DS/M & P06/HO/DS/M	Hang-out	26 Mar 2018	1 day
P07/HO&H/DS/M	Hang-out	29 Mar 2018	1 day
	Host	10-11 Sept 2018	2 days, 1 night
P09/G/DS/M	Guest	8 – 10 Jun 2018	3 days, 2 nights
P10/G/DS/M	Guest	14 – 18 Jun 2018	5 days, 4 nights
P11/G/DS/M & P12/G/DS/F	Guest	18 – 21 Jun 2018	3 days, 2 nights
P13/G/DS/F	Guest	15 – 22 Jul 2018	8 days, 7 nights
P14/G/DS/M	Guest	28 – 30 Jul 2018	3 days, 2 nights
P15/G/DS/M	Guest	15 – 17 Aug 2018	3 days, 2 nights
P16/G/DS/M	Guest	21 – 25 Oct 2018	5 days, 4 nights
P17/HO/DS/M	Hang-out	3 Nov 2018	1 day
P18/G/DS/M & P19/G/DS/F	Guest	27 – 29 Nov 2018	3 days, 2 nights
Average time for each Couchsurfing experience			3 days, 2 nights

3.4.7.1. Field-notes to inform the in-depth interviews.

The immersive, lived experience by the researcher provided opportunities to capture noteworthy reflections in order to better understand the participants. The essence of these field notes and reflections were based on actions and behaviours of the role players in a social setting – both online and face-to-face (Agar, 1996; Elliot & Jankel-Elliot, 2003; Emerson et al., 2001). More specifically, the field notes consisted of points that were importance in understanding what the participants might have done to contribute to the interaction, or what they might have expected or wanted to get out of these interactions with the researcher and reflect the researcher's perspective that needed to be corroborated through the interviews. These reflective field notes were not the primary source of data collection but rather the purpose was to:

- Inform the in-depth interview discussions to probe around certain actions or behaviours that appeared to relate to the research questions; and
- enhance the analysis and interpretation of the subjective qualitative data that emerged during the interview process.

The majority of the field notes were jotted down from memory at the end of each day or early the following morning. Very few instances took place when more than a day passed before the recollected actions were noted (Bryman, 2012; Emerson et al., 2001). However, the risk of disrupting the authenticity of the social interaction had to be avoided.

When the researcher wrote down the field notes, this was done in the privacy of his own bedroom. This location was chosen to ensure that there was no possibility of the participant becoming uncomfortable or suspicious because they felt monitored. More importantly, this procedure of compiling field notes was done during moments when the natural flow of the Couchsurfing interaction was not disrupted.

Emerson et al. (2001) highlighted that field notes are selective, descriptive, and daily accounts that are cumulatively collected without consistency and coherence. The selective process adopted during the note-taking process was not to capture everything but rather to summarise the activities of the day (i.e. actions or dialogue) that related to the main research questions.

To assist capturing the field notes in order to be further discussed during the in-depth interviews, the following guiding options were used:

- Date
- Accounts from individuals and dialogues that could be linked to the research questions
- Reactions from individuals that could be linked to the research questions
- Behaviour exhibited that could be linked to the research questions

3.4.7.2. Reflexive Diary.

Given that qualitative research is emergent, the researcher was constantly aware of the development of a deeper understanding of the social interactions as they were evidenced from one participant to the next (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2009). Therefore, in order to document subjective bias in the research, the researcher used a reflexive diary to document any personal opinions and viewpoints (LeCompte, 1999). The same document that was being used for field notes was also used for reflexive purposes. The reason for this was that certain actions by the research participants had also led the researcher to reflect on these events as well as describe any internal thoughts or biases that emerged.

This reflexive diary captured personal experiences, subjective feelings, hunches, subjective interpretations and reflections of the researcher based on their own behaviour presented in the environment (Emerson et al., 2001; Heyl, 2001; Bryman, 2012). Aunger (2004) articulated that reflexivity has been essential in determining variability in interpretation between participant and the researcher, and the reliability of the interpretation of responses from the participants.

While journaling reflexive thoughts, the researcher was also mindful of the selective process that involved deliberately selecting certain actions or conversation. There was also an attempt to include some sort of interpretation relating to selected actions. These interpretations were brought up again during the interview process to assess the subjective biases or validate the interpretations. Similarly, the researcher made inferences in the reflexive notes as and when certain actions stood out and it related to some of the literature or theoretical framework. Emerson et al. (2001, p.353) noted: *"Descriptive writing embodies and reflects particular purposes and commitments, and it also involves active processes of interpretation and sense-making."*

Three examples have been provided in Figure 3.2 to give context around the practical application of the note-taking process and incorporating reflexive notes:

a)

Morning 14 June 2018

Last night [redacted] *arrived and I picked him up from the Gautrain Station at 6pm (after he was running late from his day out at the Apartheid Museum). I was okay with his delay – after he also got stuck in traffic.*

We started conversing the moment he arrived and discussing his experiences of Johannesburg – and his experience of walking and seeing an "authentic" side of Jo'burg – not the just the "touristy spots".

We went directly from the train station to the quiz evening. The quiz evening was at a place in Pretoria (Hazelwood). He remarked that the place looked like Los Angeles. And when we arrived, he took my spot in the team and played with my friend. It looked like he had lots of fun and really enjoyed it.

I just felt like I didn't engage enough with [redacted] *but this could be due to me still needing to interview him – and not wanting to repeat anything.*

…

Evening 14 June 2018

Today upon coming home, I offered to do a bundle of [redacted] *washing in my washing machine. I did this because I know as a traveller, he is likely to need a laundromat. While I'm aware this might be a projection of what I would like to happen to me if I was in his shoes - there is also an element of being hospitable.*

…

b)

30 July 2018

Yesterday morning over breakfast that I offered [redacted]*, we were chatting about his career path and progression. He doesn't want to go into legal and rather wants to get into film documentaries. I told him my story of how I wanted to get work experience after university but I also wanted to dabble and work in the cognitive sciences. These opportunities were not practically available in the commercial sense. However, 10 years later, I found myself there and doing what I love.*

This was inspirational for [redacted] *and it felt like he was trying to probe (by asking lots of questions and then thinking after each) to find out whether he could do the same – and whether my experience had a common link to his own opportunities. I tried to inspire him to pursue the career he feels he wants.*

After breakfast we went to Bronkhorstspruit to the Buddhist temple (Nan Hua) and we walked around. He showed some interest and was excited to meet a lady that spoke Cantonese. They had a conversation and he told me how surprised he was at recognising that her accent was different but didn't realise she was Cantonese, despite speaking Mandarin. We left the temple at 2pm. I wanted to get home to watch F1 and we would do a lunch take away.

While driving home, we discussed going to Monte Casino later as he heard about it and wanted to go there. When we got back from Bronkhorstspruit, we went to the local pizzeria. I ordered my pizza and he ordered his and we paid separately. When arriving home, we ate together while I watched F1. During the F1 race, he asked questions about the sport and why I like this sport. I explained that it was mostly because of the surprise factor (not always knowing who was going to win) and having grown up watching the sport…

c)

Morning 26 October 2018

This has been a strange experience while hosting. In the beginning it was easy because we had some sort of routine. More so, he provided he gifted me with beers from Belgium when he arrived and I prepared supper that night. I think it got weird when I felt like I was just providing, for example, organising him a taxi, always preparing meals. Our conversations were short because he was talking about topics (like law) that I am not interested in.

Last night again, when we spoke about human rights, he spoke about it from a law and protections point of view. It felt like I was struggling to connect and show interest in the conversation.

…

Figure 3.2: Extract of reflexive notes for a) P10/G/DS/M, b) P14/G/DS/M, and c) P16/G/DS/M.

Keeping a reflexive diary and reporting on the researcher's own subjective accounts of events was essential to conducting this qualitative research study for validity reasons (Altheide & Johnson, 2011; Crewswell, 2009; Jones, 1970; Reed-Danahay, 2001). Validity was enhanced through reflexivity when thoughts, feelings, emotions and recognition of potential biases were noted and reported (Emerson et al., 2001). The reflexive diary was just one aspect of validity that addressed concerns around the former mentioned research process becoming *backyard research* (Creswell, 2009; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

3.5. Data Analysis and Interpretation Process

Determining an analysis approach for an interpretive, phenomenological design within the field of psychology has not been clear cut. Several authors have argued for and against certain analysis techniques that fit with the ontological and epistemological philosophy that was followed in this current study (Chamberlain, 2011; Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith, 2011a; Smith, 2011b; Terry, Hayfield, Clarke & Braun, 2017). The analysis approach as set out by the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research methodology had seemed to be the obvious choice considering the research design of this study because the purpose of this study was to search for "essence" from the data (Eatough & Smith, 2017). While thematic analysis (TA) as an analysis technique has been used more extensively in analysing qualitative data within psychology because it is complementary to different research paradigms and has been beneficial when data saturation is reached (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017).

Creswell (2009) has encouraged a blended approach to qualitative data analysis. This is supported by Spiers and Riley (2018) where they found that using both TA and IPA were complementary and elicited a "multi-layered understanding of the phenomena" (p. 276). However, in considering a blended or a pluralist approach, there still needed to be a primary

approach to the analysis (Creswell, 2009). The primary analysis procedure and framework used in this study was thematic analysis because the framework for analysis was about deriving at rich descriptive themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as opposed using an IPA technique to search for meaning behind the language people used during the interviews (Eatough & Smith, 2017). As a secondary analysis approach, IPA provided guiding principles towards ensuring that the analysis outcomes remained true to the phenomenological design. This entailed using multiple sources to capture the essence of themes through lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 2011a; Terry et al., 2017), and co-creating meaning through the interview process and validating the interpretations by sending the analysis back to the respondents for feedback (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Terry et al., 2017).

Even though thematic analysis has involved a systematic approach to arrive at themes, the outcomes still had to be guided by the research paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). In other words, following an interpretative paradigm, the researcher was conscious of avoiding reductionist analysis (as in postpositivism) and promoting themes that carried density (Smith, 2011a).

In-depth interviews were the primary method of data collection and remained the primary starting point for analysis. All data collection methods were analysed using TA (Terry et al., 2017). These data sources were ideal for TA considering each offered:

> *"Rich and complex data on a given topic are the crown jewels of qualitative research, allowing us deep and nuanced insights."* (Terry et al., 2017; p. 9)

Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019) criticised many publications for not being transparent enough of the analysis steps taken. This has not been unique to TA, but the same has been

evident in analysis techniques adopted in IPA (Smith, 2011a). For this reason, a six-step guide was developed as a framework to guide the TA process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This same analysis framework has continued to receive support in various fields (e.g. Levitt et al., 2017; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Szedlak, Smith, Day & Greenlees, 2015;).

Braun and Clarke (2019) had warned of complacency in using TA and introduced a newer approach they are terming reflexive TA. This does not mean that the six-step guide is outdated but rather the authors encourage being "deliberate" in applying TA within the research methodology and there is more reflection on "generating themes". This is best summarised as a final point in their published article:

> *"Quality matters. Understanding what you're doing, why you're doing it, and what the criteria for doing it well are, are vital for doing (reflexive) TA well."* (Braun & Clarke, 2019; p. 595)

This TA six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clark (2006) was adopted in this research study. Each of these steps, as approached by the researcher, has been described in detail below.

3.5.1. Familiarising oneself with the data.

The first step has been considered the foundation to the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As the first step, the researcher became familiar with the data on three fronts. The first part was through first-hand experience of collecting the data by means of in-depth interviews. The next step in this approach was to transcribe the audio from the in-depth interviews (see p.81).

The last step of the process was the most time consuming. The researcher printed out the transcripts and spent about a month (i.e. 16 February 2019 – 3 March 2019) re-reading all the transcripts. While doing so, the researcher also listened to the audio of the interviews via Windows Media Player. There were minor edits that were identified from the audio file and these amendments were made to the transcripts. Thereafter, the researcher spent time reading through the reflexive notes. The reflexive notes were used to augment the data extracts from the interviews.

3.5.2. Generating initial codes.

When reading through each transcript and the reflexive notes, the researcher underlined sections that appeared of interest, and made notes on these documents. In addition to this, the researcher also wrote down a summary in a separate booklet after going through each document. This latter technique was to highlight anything that stood out and began the initial process of making sense of the data.

This was followed by a more intensive coding exercise whereby the researcher went back to the transcripts. As the researcher went through each transcript again, this time, the researcher started extracting content that pertained to each section of the discussion guide and more generally, the key research objectives. This approach was data driven as opposed to theory driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). More so, these codes were primarily semantic codes as opposed to latent codes (Terry et al., 2017). This process was applied to the reflexive notes as well.

There were thirteen (13) broad coded sections that related to the transcripts and 4 broad coded sections that related to the field observation notes. The 13 broad sections identified from the transcripts were informed by the structure of the discussion guide, the research objectives,

and the recurring points of interest that stood out from the summaries made after reading all the data sources. These broad codes also developed over time from initially being eight broad sections to becoming the final thirteen broad sections. This happened while the researcher came across data extracts that did not fit the original eight broad sections.

The reflexive notes were reduced into four broad coded sections because the reflections related to one of four areas of interest (i.e. gestures made as a host, gestures made as a guest, themes that related back to the transcript analysis, and miscellaneous). These coded sections have been listed in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5

Codes used to group data extracts

Broad coded sections for transcript TA	Broad coded sections for reflexive notes TA
Give-and-take / Reciprocity / Gestures of reciprocating	Gestures made as a host
Give-and-take is broken / Reciprocity diminishes	Gestures made as a guest
Social connections	Themes that related back to the transcript analysis
Offering an experience / being offered an experience	Miscellaneous
CouchSurfing is so much more than accommodation	
Trust in the community	
Traveller, not a tourist	
Self-perception	
It's a feeling (Emergent & consisted of latent codes)	
Hostels offer a different experience / Others like CouchSurfing (Emerged)	
Semantics of sharing and concept of altruism (Emergent & consisted of latent codes)	
Money changes the relationship (Emergent)	

To capture the data extracts, these were written on a post-it sticky notes. These sticky notes were placed on the A1 sheet of paper when the broad code related to the data extract. This sticky note process was used (as opposed to putting these extracts into an excel file or software like NVivo and AtlasTI, for example) because the data groupings were constantly visible to the researcher to make the ongoing coding process easier and ultimately, assist the ongoing "making

sense of the data" process. As the researcher progressed through each transcript, data extracts that were related to each other (or if there was a pattern that began to emerge) were placed together into meaningful groups. Figure 3.3 illustrates how these groupings took shape. While it may have appeared to be incoherent, the meaningful groups were still evident to the researcher when using them for the next phases of TA.

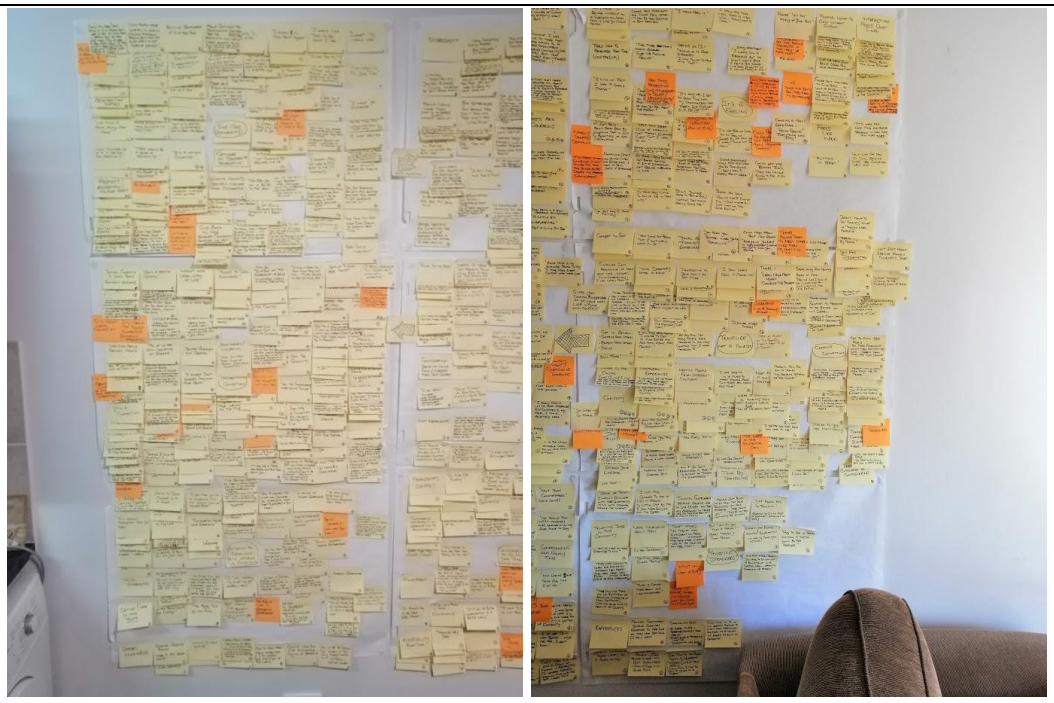


Figure 3.3: Example of the meaningful groupings that were placed within the broad coded sections for both the analysis of the transcripts.

Sometimes a data extract was placed in multiple broad coded groupings or in multiple meaningful groupings. Furthermore, the researcher was also searching for divergence and differences within the data (Smith, 2011a). Orange post-it sticky notes were used to record relationships between groupings, thoughts relating to previously read literature, or subjective interpretation biases noticed by the researcher. These additional notes were valuable for the next phases of TA.

3.5.3. Searching for themes (generating themes).

It is during this process where the different paradigms play a role. Braun and Clarke (2019) reflected on their observations whereby academics have positioned TA as a methodology on its own, and have applied it within a systematic, post-positivist paradigm. The technique of generating themes can become reductionist and lose the essence required in the interpretative paradigm.

To maintain the density and richness of the data, the researcher chose to work from the A1 sheets and read through the meaningful groupings. Most meaningful groupings or clusters of groupings could already be defined into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, the researcher remained mindful by questioning some of the groupings and what these groupings mean. Often these groupings were self-explanatory on a semantic level. However, there were groupings that carried latent codes. Through this process, broader themes and their sub-themes became evident.

A list of themes was created as they were existed in each section. Figure 3.4 provides an illustration of some of the themes that were linked to some of the sections. In most sections, there were over-arching themes while in other sections, sub-themes could already be linked to an over-arching theme.

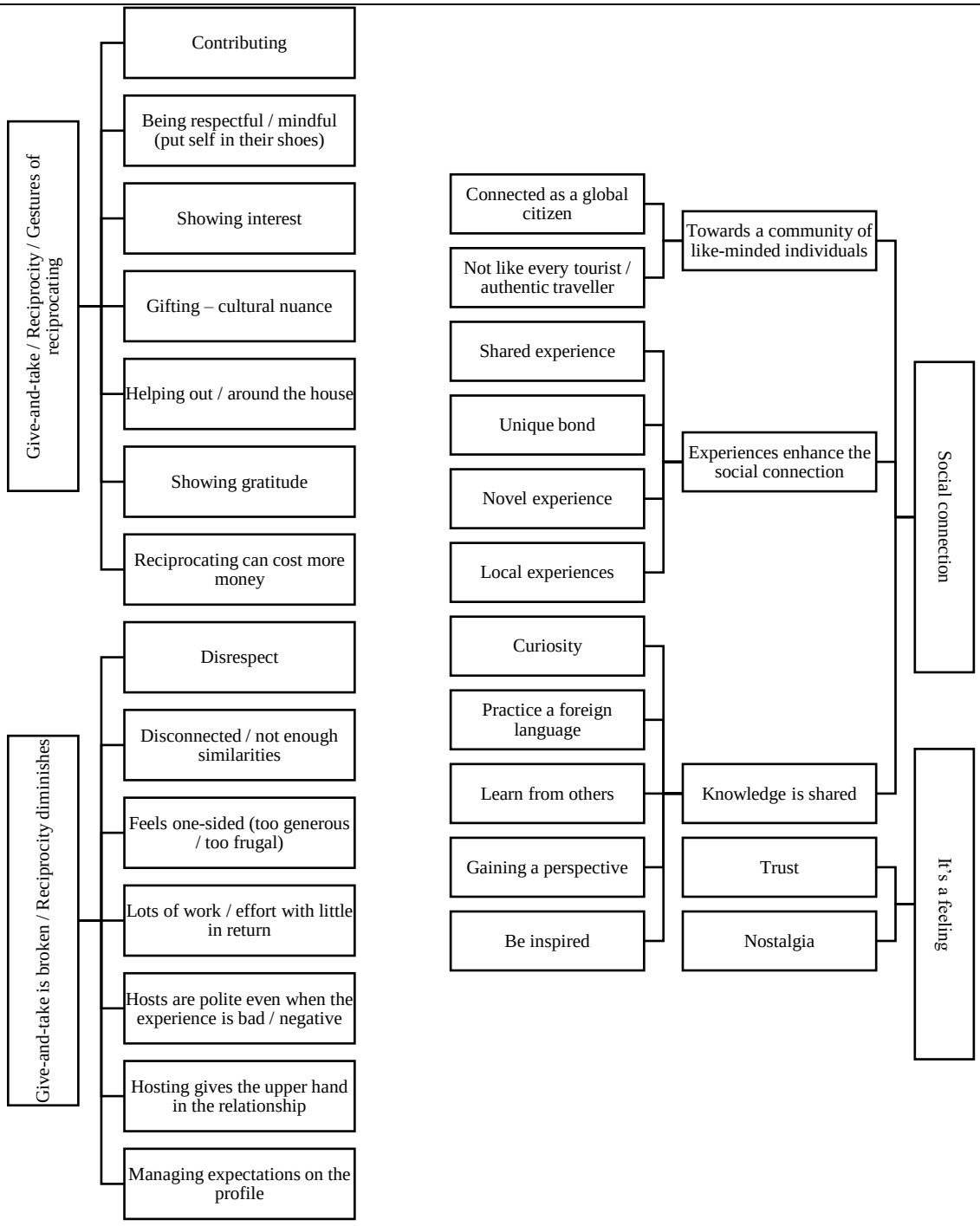


Figure 3.4: An example of some of the themes generated and their sub-themes.

3.5.4. Reviewing themes

The reviewing and refinement process involved the following:

- Merging of groupings from different sources under the relevant themes;
- Restructuring the cluster of groupings that emerged under all sections to ensure that where they were placed did not influence the interpretation (e.g. gifting – cultural nuance was taken out of the section "Give-and-take / Reciprocity / Gestures of reciprocating" because it had nothing to do with reciprocating);
- Extracting disconfirming evidence into their own groupings (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Smith, 2001a); and
- A parking lot was created for groupings or data extracts that did not seem to fit a theme.

In some instances, there were new themes that were formed because of the interpretation of the nuances or latent codes containing rich data extracts. A more detailed overview of the revised themes and their placement into categories has been included in Annexure 9: Coding Frame and Generated Themes (see p.271).

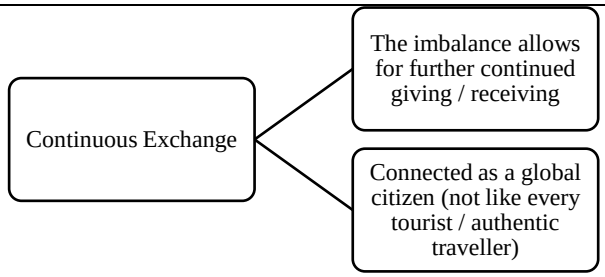


Figure 3.5: An example of a reconstructed theme generated from the interpretation and nuancing of respondent sentiment.

Even though these themes were generated and reviewed, it was important to keep all the data extracts (i.e. quotes, field notes and online content excerpts) tied to these themes. This

ensured that the richness and essence of the interpretation was not lost (Creswell, 2009; Smith, 2011a).

3.5.5. Defining and naming themes.

This step and the next step (i.e. producing the report) evolved over eight months. To commence this phase, there was a focus on refining and defining the themes without losing the essence of the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A mind map was used to first illustrate the over-arching relationship between themes and how they related to the research objectives. This helped the researcher to begin constructing the story that each theme told.

The researcher began compiling a document that put the themes together and provided detailed descriptions of the interpretation of what these themes meant – with supporting rich data extracts (Smith, 2001a). The use of the supporting data extracts kept the researcher honest regarding what the theme entailed and what it did not. This approach also included clarifying the themes into working titles (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The structure of the analysis took shape as the researcher continued to compile these themes.

As a final part of this step, a word document containing the research findings with the themes and the supporting data extracts was put together. This word document was in the same format as the way that the research findings chapter from this dissertation was compiled. The analysis word document was then sent to all research participants for member checking purposes (see Table 3.6, p.110). This was to validate the interpretation of the analysis. All feedback from participants was considered – and some sent additional examples of their own experiences to substantiate the themes.

3.5.6. Producing the report.

The final step of TA entailed the production of the next chapter (i.e. Research Findings). Braun and Clarke (2006) again provided some guiding principles which were included (e.g. sufficient, rich, illustrative evidence by means of data extracts to support the themes and interpretation of these themes).

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Prior to commencing with the study, ethical clearance was granted by the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) Human Research Ethics Committee (see Annexure 1: University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) HREC Ethics Clearance Certificate, p.251). Also leading up to conducting the research, a letter was electronically mailed to the management of Couchsurfing informing them of the purposes of the research. An example of this letter is included in Annexure 3: Letter Addressed to Couchsurfing for Permission to Conduct the Research Study (see p. 255). Couchsurfing granted conditional approval around which process was sanctioned and which process was excluded when inviting members to participate in the research (see Figure 3.1: Conditional permission granted for the research by Couchsurfing., p.73).

All participants received a participant information sheet (see Annexure 4: Participant Information Sheet, p.259) and signed an informed consent form (see Annexure 5: Informed Consent Form, p.262) and a consent form to audio record the interview (see Annexure 6: Consent Form to Audio Record the Interview, p.265) before their information could be collected and used for analysis purposes. The participation information sheet and consent forms were given to the participants before they hosted or were hosted by the researcher. For those only participating in the in-depth interview process, they were given these forms prior to the interview.

The participant information sheet and consent forms contained a section that reminded the participants that their anonymity would always be maintained, and their information treated confidentially. This entailed keeping the identities of the participants confidential and removing any identifiable characteristics captured on any recordings, field notes or online extracts in the analysis process and subsequently the writing up of the research. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of respondents. In the beginning of the analysis process, all participants were assigned random numbers (i.e. 01 to 19) as a form of pseudonym. All data extracts contained this form of pseudonym as a reference point. It was only until when writing up of the final report that the number was changed to a more descriptive keyword to provide additional context and meaning to the data extract.

No person under the age of eighteen (18) formed part of the research. Any individual could refuse to participate in the research. All participants still maintained their right to leave or be excluded from the research at any time. Furthermore, the researcher was conscientious and mindful of his safety and wellbeing during fieldwork as per the recommended safety guidelines offered by Couchsurfing (see Annexure 8: Couchsurfing Safety Tab, p.270).

No individuals refused participation or opted out from the research. There were individuals who had been told about the research in the beginning and some even received the participant information sheet when they showed interest. However, if they did not respond further about participating, the researcher respected their silence as non-interest. In other words, the researcher asked everyone once about participating in the research and if there was no response or follow-up, the researcher respected their position. No further encouragement to participate was pursued by the researcher as this could have been viewed as badgering or soliciting.

All transcripts, audio data and analysis were saved in a Dropbox account owned by the researcher that has been password protected. This information will be kept safely by the researcher for a period of 5 years after completion of the dissertation or for the duration as prescribed by the Wits Human Research Ethics Committee.

The researcher uploaded the audio files of each interview to both the websites of Transcribe by Wreally and OTranscribe during the process of compiling transcripts. OTranscribe does not store any of the uploaded content and thus the information of the respondents remained confidential. The researcher consulted a representative of the ethics committee (see Annexure 10: Email Trail of Consultation with Representative from Wits HREC Ethics Committee using Online Transcription Services, p.273) regarding the ethical consideration behind Transcribe by Wreally securely storing the uploaded data for machine learning purposes to improve the auto-transcription function. Given these audio files were encrypted on their system with no other human being having access besides the researcher, there was no further concern of a confidentiality breach.

3.7. Reliability

At the core of reliability in qualitative research, there needed to be adequate and compelling support from the data to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was done by using primary and secondary qualitative data sources to keep the interpretation robust and well-supported. The research findings maintained the credibility and confirmability by substantiating the themes with enough supporting data (Smith, 2011a).

In addition to this, the dependability of the research results was reliant on consistency of the research approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). More so, the research procedures adopted have been transparently and comprehensively written-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019; Levitt et al., 2017; Smith, 2011a). This ensures that future studies in this field can repeat measures or adapt and build-on the necessary measures without compromise.

There was a concerted effort by the researcher to explore differences between other non-monetary sharing economy platforms to establish transferability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There were indications of cases that emerged to indicate that these findings were not just unique to Couchsurfing. Some of the themes and research findings were applicable to other similar platforms where money had been removed as an exchange mechanic from the environment or the community – and the interactions were face-to-face (e.g. seed sharing communities).

3.8. Validity

Validity in this qualitative research study was ensured by determining the trustworthiness and authenticity of interpretation of the data from the perspective of the researcher, the participants and the reviewers external to the research study (Altheide & Johnson, 2013; Creswell & Miller, 2000). The qualitative validity measures followed by this study had remained relevant to the research paradigm involved in co-creating social realities through an interpretative-constructivist lens (Creswell & Miller, 2000). A summary has been tabulated in Table 3.6 to provide an overview of the validity process employed by the researcher.

Table 3.6

Overview of the validity measures used in the research as outlined

Lens of the Researcher	Lens of the participants	Lens of People External to the Study

Triangulation (Multiple data sources)	Disconfirming evidence	Member checking	Prolonged engagement in the field	Thick, rich descriptions for an audit trail
The use of multiple iterations and variation by other participants during the interviews (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow & Ponterotto, 2017)	Through sampling (atypical cases) and themes obtained in the analysis to find divergence (Smith, 2011a)	A final analysis document containing the themes and rich descriptions from multiple sources was sent to all participants in the study.	Spent 1 year 3 months in field – actively participating as host and guest in the Couchsurfing community	Included multiple rich data extracts from commencement of TA to final output in the form of the Research Findings chapter

Note: Adapted from "Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry," by J.W. Creswell and D. L. Miller, 2000, *Theory into Practice*, *39*(P03/G/PS/M), p. 126. Copyright by College of Education, The Ohio State University.

The researcher's viewpoint was validated through triangulation and disconfirming evidence. Triangulation involved the merging of various data sources (i.e. interviews and the reflexive diary) used during the thematic analysis process (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000). The researcher was also purposeful in finding variation in evidence (Levitt et al., 2017). The researcher was open to including participants that behaved contrary to others during the fieldwork phase or searching for data that differed from the common themes during the analysis process (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Smith, 2011a).

Member checking and the extended period in the field formed the basis of deriving validity from the position of the participant (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000). The interpretations in the form of an analysis document were sent to the participants to ensure that the understanding was not diluted by the researcher's own subjectivity. Table 3.6 had been included above (see p.110) for transparency and audit trail purposes (i.e. the third lens of validity). Not all participants gave feedback despite responding positively to the initial request to provide feedback. A common point of feedback from participants was that they could identify with the themes in the analysis as well as determine which participant they were when including their quotes from the interview. The pseudonyms protected their identity for anyone else who would

read the data extracts and quotes. However, for validity purposes, this feedback was necessary to ensure that their voice was not lost through the analysis.

Where there were discrepancies, this was not as a result of the interpretation. Rather suggestions were made to either enhance the interpretation or add credence to the interpretation. For one respondent, he wondered if his way of speaking differed from what he thought. More so, there was also a suggestion made when using the data extracts so that it would make more sense to another reader. For another two respondents, they felt that an issue around misusing the Couchsurfing platform for sexual reasons or sexual abuse could have been missed in the analysis.

Based on the feedback, the researcher revisited the research findings and incorporated the necessary changes – for example, summarising verbatim responses that were overly verbose. There were also points of discussion that were not mentioned during the interviews, but these were raised in the feedback from respondents during the member checking process.

Table 3.7

Member checking process and feedback from respondents

Respondent ID	Date of sending out	Process of sending out	Date of receipt (Method of feedback)
P01/G/DS/M	20 Jan 2020	Whats App (notification) **Confirmed via WhatsApp** Sent pdf and word doc via email – deadline mid-Feb 2020	10 Feb 2020 (Email)
P02/H/DS/F	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp (notification) **Confirmed via WhatsApp** Sent pdf and word doc via email – deadline mid-Feb 2020	-
P03/G/PS/M	20 Jan 2020	FaceBook Messenger (notification) **Confirmed via FaceBook Messenger** Sent pdf and word doc via email – deadline mid-Feb 2020	23 Jan 2020 (Email)
P04/G/PS/M	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp and FaceBook Messenger (notification)	-
P05/HO/DS/M & P06/HO/DS/M	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp and FaceBook Messenger (notification) **Confirmed via WhatsApp** Sent pdf and word doc via WA – deadline mid-Feb 2020	-
P07/HO&H/DS/M	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp (notification) **Confirmed via WhatsApp** Sent pdf and word doc via email – deadline mid-Feb 2020	-
P08/G&H/PS/M	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp (notification)	25 Jan 2020 (Email)

		Confirmed via WhatsApp Sent pdf and word doc via email – deadline mid-Feb 2020	
P09/G/DS/M	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp (notification) **Confirmed via WhatsApp** Sent pdf and word doc via email – deadline end-Feb 2020 (*needed a few weeks because of work*)	-
P10/G/DS/M	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp and CouchSurfing Message (notification) **Confirmed via FaceBook Messenger** Sent pdf and word doc via email – deadline mid-Feb 2020	-
P11/G/DS/M & P12/G/DS/F	20 Jan 2020	FaceBook Messenger (notification) **Confirmed via FaceBook Messenger** Sent pdf and word doc via email – deadline mid-Feb 2020	
P13/G/DS/F	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp and CouchSurfing Message (notification) **Confirmed via CouchSurfing message on 25 Jan** Sent pdf and word doc via email – deadline mid-Feb 2020	12 Feb 2020 (Email)
P14/G/DS/M	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp (notification) **Confirmed via WhatsApp** Sent pdf and word doc via email – deadline mid-Feb 2020	-
P15/G/DS/M	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp (notification) **Confirmed via WhatsApp on 21 Jan** Sent pdf and word doc via email – deadline mid-Feb 2020	-
P16/G/DS/M	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp (notification) **Confirmed via WhatsApp** Sent pdf doc via email – deadline mid-Feb 2020	8 Feb 2020 (WhatsApp)
P17/HO/DS/M	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp (notification) **Confirmed via WhatsApp** Sent pdf and word doc via WA – deadline mid-Feb 2020	24 Feb 2020 (WhatsApp)
P18/G/DS/M & P19/G/DS/F	20 Jan 2020	WhatsApp (notification) **Confirmed via WhatsApp** Sent pdf and word doc via email – deadline mid-Feb 2020	-

Lastly, thick, rich descriptions of the analysed data during the articulation of the discussion sections in the final thesis have allowed for validity based on the vantage point of the outsider.

3.9. Positionality of the researcher

The active role of the researcher in Couchsurfing prior to commencing this study indicated that there was no *tabula rasae*. Six years of prior Couchsurfing experiences (both as host and as guest) had an influence on having been aware of some of the behaviours that would be present in the environment. Some initial thoughts around the behaviour in the environment were swayed during the proposal phase when reviewing the literature available at the time.

However, as the fieldwork commenced and the immersive lived experiences became more frequent, the researcher recognised the transition of being mostly an *insider studying their own practices* towards an *insider studying in collaboration with other insiders* (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, Qin, 2016).

The risk of inviting participants to partake in the research while they were being hosted could have affected and biased the outcomes of the research. This was because these participants could have seen their actions as already being reciprocated. This might have skewed the research results towards supporting social exchange theory and the reciprocal exchange dynamic because the researcher was receiving something in return for having the Couchsurfer participate in the study. Under these circumstances, the researcher remained vigilant of any impact that the participant's involvement in the study had on them possibly reciprocating or not reciprocating during the immersive experience. As the research findings attested, there was more to reciprocation than just returning a favour. However, without this hindsight, the researcher recorded any possible biases relating to this matter in the observation notes.

The reflexive process assisted the researcher in becoming aware of his subjectivity and biases during the lived experiences. More notably, there was a transformation during the interviews where the pre-existing biases shifted for the researcher. An important obstacle for the researcher to overcome was embracing the interpretive paradigm by accepting the multiple realities – as opposed to denying the possible other realities as presented by the participants. This evolution of embracing the multiple realities was most evident when the researcher came across participants who had a different way of expressing their experiences of Couchsurfing (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Smith, 2011a).

The consistency of the findings as presented in the results chapter had more do to with the commonalities between the researcher and the participants (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Even though the gender and education levels for most of the participants were similar to the researcher's (see Table 3.1, p.79), there was one other commonality that became apparent during the analysis of the interviews. There were participants, including the researcher, who considered themselves travellers and had a similar values system. When sending out invites or accepting requests by Couchsurfers, the researcher knew which individuals would be worth hosting. This was based on selecting individuals with a similar outlook in life, for example, they looked at life introspectively and were curious by nature. This information was available in the online profiles.

In essence, the research included certain bias. This bias was further accentuated by the former Couchsurfing experiences of the researcher. While the researcher was mindful of any preconceptions and used a reflexive diary to remain aware of his own subjectivity, the stance of the research stemmed from an insider's perspective. Therefore, this stance was useful in understanding the realities of this form of the sharing economy when comparing these results with those who have studied the context from an outside-in perspective.

4. Research Findings

This chapter provides a detailed presentation of the themes that emerged from the analysis of the participant interviews and the reflexive notes from an immersive experience while using the Couchsurfing platform. Throughout this chapter, it was important to first indicate the grouped themes (and some sub-themes) that emerged when Couchsurfers described their experiences relating to the interaction with their hosts or guests. The results have been structured around the four research questions.

1. Understanding the social nature of the interaction in Couchsurfing by clarifying the reciprocal dynamics;
2. Exploring measures that Couchsurfers used to ensure that the interaction was reciprocal;
3. Determining whether altruism affected the social nature of the Couchsurfing interaction;
4. Understanding how both individuals in the exchange maximised their benefits.

The relationship of these grouped themes to the literature and the theoretical framework has not been considered in this chapter. Rather this chapter provides a subjective, interpretative account of the research findings. Quotations and personal reflexive accounts have also been included, where necessary, to illustrate themes.

4.1. Understanding the social nature of the interaction in Couchsurfing by clarifying the reciprocal dynamics

There was no rule book or prescribed way to navigate the Couchsurfing environment as host or guest. At most, the website offered a few basics to explain the concept of reciprocity (see Figure 2.1: An extract from the About Us webpage tab on the Couchsurfing website (Couchsurfing, 2020a)., p.39, Couchsurfing, 2020a). There were those who struggled to *"suss out"* the environment. Others adopted a *figure it out as you go along* approach.

"A lot of times, it's this vague thing." (P11/G/DS/M)

"Tread lightly for a couple of days." (P13/G/DS/F)

To fully understand the social nature of the interaction, it was important to recognise reciprocity in the context of Couchsurfing. The most telling indication was that there was a general awareness that the provisions made by the host were not for free. The Couchsurfing guest was aware of their role in the relationship that after a provision, an action was needed to return the favour by giving back.

"You kind of have to give something back… it's not going to be them that only gives me a roof." (P11/G/DS/M)

"You're hosting me and in exchange, I come and cook for you." (P15/G/DS/M)

The reciprocal nature of the interactions was further affirmed when participants used words like *"reciprocity"*, *"give-and-take"* or *"give-and-receive"* to describe their Couchsurfing experiences. This would confirm that those participating in Couchsurfing recognised that their interactions with other Couchsurfers required a reciprocal response or at least was reciprocal in

nature. A reciprocal relationship developed only once the individual responded to that provision by giving back. The participants of the research recognised this and emphasised that they wanted a mutually beneficial reciprocal exchange during their Couchsurfing interactions.

> *"I want an exchange… it can be very enriching on both partners … because it could be very balanced."* (P02/H/DS/F)

> *"The feeling that you get something out of it… you'll be hosted by other people and you get something out of it. And obviously, your host also wants to get something out of it."* (P04/G/PS/M)

> *"In my experience with you, we both gave some things and that's how a Couchsurfing experience, as I think it, should be."* (P11/G/DS/M)

4.1.1. Reciprocity through the tangible exchange in Couchsurfing.

There were certain forms of giving back in a tangible way that revealed themselves when the participants spoke about their experiences from Couchsurfing. Each of these tangible ways of giving back showed up at different parts of the Couchsurfing journey with the host. The research found four (4) general ways that Couchsurfers gave back tangibly.

4.1.1.1. Showing appreciation: Gifting.

Guests brought along a gift and offered it to the host when they arrived. This gift was a gesture to acknowledge the provision made. It also appeared that bringing along a gift become an option as a form of reciprocation the more they used Couchsurfing.

> *"It's cheaper than (paid) accommodation but you bring a small gift... it's this recognition that somebody is hosting you. So in this idea of reciprocity… I think, had I been younger*

and coming more from a United States framework, I might have been, like, 'Uh, this is cool.' And just, you know go and crash on the couch or whatever it is." (P03/G/PS/M)

4.1.1.2. Helping around the house.

Guests were also helpful around the house of the host. Being helpful entailed preparing a meal for the host, cleaning the house, and tidying after themselves.

"They were really eager to cook… they we're happily pitching in." (P03/G/PS/M)

"Help to do shopping… help people in their daily life… cook them a meal." (P14/G/DS/M)

In other times, guests were limited by the resources that they had available to reciprocate. Being helpful around the house, like cleaning and buying a few groceries, was their only way to feel like they reciprocated.

"There was not much I could do in return… So what I did was helping him out whenever I could, like cleaning the house or cooking or buy(ing) some groceries for him, if I could." (P04/G/PS/M)

Helping out around the house was not just about giving back. The actions by the guest were also about showing that they empathised with the host. They committed to actions that made the hosting experience more effortless for the host. This was again done by ensuring they cleaned up after themselves or prepared a meal.

"If I dirty something, I'll rinse it… clean the table or something… just like leave the space in the condition where I found it." (P10/G/DS/M)

4.1.1.3. Contributing to the expenses in the environment.

Couchsurfers came to realise that Couchsurfing was not really a *free* form of accommodation. Sometimes there were additional monetary costs that guests incurred. Any monetary expenditure made during their stay was voluntary. Furthermore, guests recognised the importance of contributing towards any expenditure that the host might have had – specifically related to grocery spend and going out for a meal or drinks.

> *"I would feel like, okay now I will buy them something or make sure to shop (for) some groceries on the way back which is a nice thing to do."* (P09/G/DS/M)

> *"When we were at the store, I'm like 'Hey, like I got it covered.' I'll pay because I know that it's your resources that we used."* (P10/G/DS/M)

4.1.1.4. Written gratitude at the end of a Couchsurfing experience.

Another way of showing their appreciation was through a written form. There were Couchsurfers who left a post card at the end of their stay as a unique token of their gratitude.

> *"He brings a postcard from his place and he writes (on it), instead of leaving just a thank-you note on piece of paper. (It's) a postcard from his place. That was really really really nice."* (P15/G/DS/M)

4.1.2. Reciprocity through non-tangible gestures in Couchsurfing.

Those reciprocating also were aware of their own behaviour in the home of another Couchsurfer. This meant that they wanted to give back by behaving appropriately and being respectful as a form of showing an appreciation to the provider in the relationship. An obvious way was that Couchsurfers recognised the importance of verbally expressing their gratitude when something was given to them in the environment.

"At least, 'Thank you'… because it acknowledges the fact that I have done this." (P16/G/DS/M)

The respect shown to the host or guest during the interaction was the essence to forming the relationship and moderating the exchange. This respect needed to come from both individuals. This also meant that both individuals, and especially the guest, needed to figure out what was appropriate behaviour for the environment to showcase their mutual respect.

"I definitely felt like I needed to provide some sort of value… to be well behaved, to be well-mannered, to show an appreciation for like the selflessness of the host. So I definitely felt like I needed to sort of give back… I didn't want to seem like I didn't appreciate, the home, you know, the people and animals were important in your life… I feel like it's very important to be, to have that like mutual respect." (P10/G/DS/M)

"I don't think that I like maybe push too much of my life on to anybody. It's more so observing how somebody else lives theirs and navigating around there, so they can still live their comfortable life." (P13/G/DS/F)

The respect shown in the environment, whether from the host or the guest, entailed being perceptive of their own behaviour and constantly assessing whether the behaviour would be acceptable if they were on the receiving end of that behaviour. If they deemed their own behaviour unacceptable, then they assumed it would be unacceptable to their host or guest that they were interacting with on Couchsurfing.

"Imagine if I say I'm going to someone's place and I will stay ten days... the person would might not be so happy, especially because if it happens to me, I would not be so happy." (P16/G/DS/M)

4.1.3. Reciprocity through the social exchange in Couchsurfing.

It became more apparent from the analysis that the reciprocal exchange of tangible goods was less important. Rather, it was about how these tangible reciprocal gestures contributed to opportunities for a social exchange. They would use these tangible offerings (e.g. cooking a meal, buying their host a beer at a local hangout spot) to allow for an opportunity to converse and engage in a conversation.

> *"It's people's experiences that you share, that I share by talking about myself ... That l find enriching, they are enriching to my life. They bring value to my life. The company, we'll be cooking a dinner and I will cook x and you cook y, and it's value, it's a human interaction."* (P02/H/DS/F)

> *"(As a host) I'm not going to ask them for any money… they can buy me a beer or something… beer is a social lubricant."* (P08/GH/PS/M)

Couchsurfers used these opportunities to converse so that they could spend time together and talk about their common interests. These social interactions were also a way from Couchsurfers to learn from each other.

> *"It's not only hosting and being hosted… there's something beyond… I think it´s well aligned with the values you may expect from Couchsurfing, which is like a lot of exchange and stuff. Because those people are really willing to meet others, to meet other cultures, to ask questions about you, to explain their likes, to see differences and stuff. So it really fits the experiences I'm looking for."* (P15/G/DS/M)

Couchsurfers were cognisant of needing to spend time with their hosts – more so than hosts needed to spend time with their guests. The time spent together allowed each to talk about

themselves, their views, their experiences and more importantly, their travels. It was also important for the guest to show interest and curiosity towards the host.

> *"They were very friendly and hospitable… they helped me and I told him about my trip and myself, and I believe they were happy to host me."* (P09/G/DS/M)

As mentioned previously, there were Couchsurfers who travelled on a tight budget. This meant that they were limited by what they could give back. Therefore, as much as they helped around the house to showcase their reciprocity, they also understood the importance of the social nature of Couchsurfing. Therefore, they naturally chose to spend time with their host as a gesture of giving back.

> *"We could not give more than stories or sharing our time."* (P01/G/DS/M)

> *"You want to do what you can to return that… that doesn't necessarily have to be in material ways but just being present… whatever little you have."* (P03/G/PS/M)

4.1.4. Gut feeling of wanting to give back that led to voluntary reciprocity.

There was more to returning the favour in the context of Couchsurfing. Those who participated in the research used the words, *"feel(s)"*, *"feeling(s)"* and *"felt"* quite frequently throughout their conversations about Couchsurfing. The reason that this stood out was because these words were used to express their reasoning around why they gave back while interacting with others in the community. There were those who acknowledged that they had a feeling to reciprocate.

> *"I kind of felt I had to (share stories)."* (P11/G/DS/M)

This gut feeling was important for two reasons. The first reason was that it made the ease of the reciprocal flow easier for both parties which resulted in a pleasant Couchsurfing experience. The second reason was that it alluded to individuals who might have understood that there was something reciprocal about Couchsurfing but it was not something that came naturally to them. Later sections of the research findings will bring further clarity around these individuals who did not have this natural affinity to reciprocity.

There was an appreciation when reciprocating came naturally and voluntarily to the members of Couchsurfing. The reciprocal actions needed to be at the discretion of the Couchsurfer. This meant that the receiver should not be told to give back by the provider. There needed to be a natural affinity towards recognising that they were gaining in the relationship. As such, this perceived gain initiated their need to give back. In the example below, the guest perceived their need to give back and how the self-reflection of the host acknowledged the benefit of this natural reciprocal response.

> *"I know that your resources were used and I didn't just want to take, take, take… That's why I like to offer and say, 'Hey, I got that.'"* (P10/G/DS/M)
>
> *"I didn't feel that he needed to contribute to the groceries but it did leave me with a sense of comfort for him extending his stay longer that I was not the only one who was going to provide during his stay.'"* (Reflections while hosting P10/G/DS/M)

There were also certain unspoken and unwritten values that governed the community of Couchsurfing and members wanted to uphold them. These values included showing respect, reciprocity being natural to members, not expecting money to be a form of exchange, and truly wanting to connect with others.

"Cannot be money or something because this is not the spirit at all." (P01/G/DS/M)

These values related to how both host and guest should have behaved during their encounters. Couchsurfers referred to an individual who happened to be in-line with these values and what was expected from them as having the *spirit of Couchsurfing*. More specifically, the *spirit of Couchsurfing* was a premise where an individual was able to self-govern without needing to be told how to behave in the Couchsurfing environment. This suggested that they had not needed to rely on externally communicated expectations, rules, and regulations – and rather members intuitively related to the reciprocity coming naturally. It was easy to integrate into the Couchsurfing community because this was how they already behaved.

4.1.5. Reciprocity was not just once-off but continuous.

Reciprocity in Couchsurfing was not as simple as giving back after each provision. This became clearer during the immersions when reflecting as a host and as a guest. There was often a lot of tangible provision that had been made upfront during the interaction. For example, guests were collected from the train station, and there was a welcoming meal and drink before the guests would reciprocate. Furthermore, the interaction had not ended once the guest reciprocated in a tangible way to make up for the provision made by the host. The gesture of giving back perpetuated an ongoing exchange between both host and guest that continued for the duration their stay. This meant that there was a constant providing and giving back within the environment that neither individual in the interaction was consciously tracking.

"We went for drinks and some food at a local pub and grill…. After the bill came, we negotiated what they would pay on the bill and what I would like to contribute. In the end, they paid for everything. I really wanted to contribute to the evening out because I

was hosting them. By this point, it felt like they were already giving back quite a lot to me as the host. I allowed them an opportunity to give back but I was already thinking of what I could do to give back to them for what this meal that they paid for." (Reflections while hosting participants P11/G/DS/M & P12/G/DS/F)

There were also instances where the host continued the reciprocal act by contributing once again towards the exchange. In this case, the additional contribution was towards some of the expenditure that the guests were incurring.

"I allowed him to pay for the groceries and in return, I bought beers. I only thought it fair that I still contribute towards have groceries and include drinks for us to relax and spend time getting to know each other." (Reflections while hosting participant P10/G/DS/M)

There were guests who enjoyed their interactions with their hosts after their Couchsurfing experience. This allowed both individuals to continue where they left off after the initial Couchsurfing interaction.

"There was this girl sending a message like, 'Hey, we should meet. I cannot host you but I really would like to meet you guys.' …She lived in Singapore. 'Okay, we have a few hours, let's go meet her. We have nothing else to do, it's the last day.' So we went to meet her … She was talking, talking, talking, super big smile, like super friendly and in just a few minutes we became super friendly. After Singapore, a few months later, I was staying in Sydney with my friend and she sent a message like, 'Hey guys, so funny you're in Sydney. I just moved to Sydney.' … So we met again there and then after 1 year, I went back to France and she came to visit two times… we're still friends." (P01/G/DS/M)

"For example, in San Francisco, I've been hosted by two people and I spent some time there with a girl. We visited and stuff… like one day, the three of them, they wrote to me… we (are) still exchanging." (P15/G/DS/M)

There were guests felt who they were not able to give back directly to the original interaction in the way they wanted to. This was often expressed when these individuals received more than they felt worthy of receiving, they wanted to continue to pay it forward. There were Couchsurfers who felt that they wanted to give back to the Couchsurfing community by choosing to host others. This was an important role for them because it allowed them to feel like they had contributed towards Couchsurfing and not just taken from the environment.

"So I suppose it's also a way of giving back… I've been Couchsurfing many times more than I've hosted. So I can never host as many as I've been hosted. But at least make an honest effort to do something and help other travellers." (P09/G/DS/M)

"It reassures me that I didn't use it (Couchsurfing), use people, misuse them. This (was) comforting in the sense that I was a member of the community and not just a free rider. Even though while the first experiences I had (involved) lots of free riding. Yes, because I was very poor indeed, but it comforted me in the sense that I'm a member of this community and I belong to this community and I give as much as I get or even more." (P16/G/DS/M)

There were also Couchsurfers who chose to give back to other members of the travelling community. Individuals recognised the similarities of their own experiences from what Couchsurfing offered and chose to give back to others (not using Couchsurfing) who might have benefitted from their actions.

"Now-a-days, if I'm out in Germany and I meet travellers, I always try to help or maybe ask them if I can do anything for them… Because I got to know how weird it feels if you're totally lost in a foreign city and you don't know where to go… it's very nice if there're people who just care about you… it makes your stay better." (P04/G/PS/M)

4.1.6. Cross-cultural experiences of reciprocity.

Couchsurfing involves a cross-cultural experience. Guests were hyper-vigilant of their behaviour when staying with others cultural groups. Couchsurfers moderated their behaviour in the company of the host. This ensured that they showed respect and were willing to adopt cultural practices associated to the country they were visiting.

"We stayed two nights… because we don't want to disturb… different cultures, different traditions… You can think you're doing well but not so… Because now we are two and we are going to we stayed two nights… we don't want to disturb. I mean, it is your home. So maybe in three days (you say), 'These guys taking my things' or 'it's a fucken mess.' We don't want that. I'm sure that we are tidy people, like very proper. But sometimes different cultures (mean) different traditions. I've been in Japan and you have to take off your shoes and a lot of stuff like this. So it's crazy. So you can think you are doing well, but not so." (P18/G/DS/M)

Bring along a gift was a popular way to arrive at the house of their host. This act of gifting more *customary* than it was *necessary*. There were Couchsurfers who believed that it was a culturally appropriate means of showing appreciation to the host for accepting their request. This customary act of gifting was mentioned more specifically when an individual was hosted by Korean and Japanese Couchsurfers. The custom of bringing a gift in this context was seen as

being appropriate as opposed to reciprocating the invitation to their house. The gifts were small tokens of appreciation, like fridge magnets or a bottle of beer.

> *"You bring something to the equation... something as small a little magnet, a fridge magnet, that is from wherever you're from."* (P02/H/DS/F)

> *"In different societies, there is a tradition and history of gift giving… one example, is the refrigerator magnet which seems to have a lot of traction on the Couchsurfing community. I think refrigerator magnets are great, tea towels are great. Ask somebody else, they will say, 'Oh, I always bring beer.' Some will say, 'I never bring alcohol because I don't like to drink.'"* (P08/GH/PS/M)

A gift also came in the form of an experience. It was about introducing the host to something a cultural experience that the host would not have experienced before. One way to gift a local experience was often through a meal.

> *"I do hope I get some kind of cultural exchange from them… we'll cook, share dinner together. We will try to cook local as much as possible… this is my dish, this is your dish… I get to experience something really local like an Italian cooking pasta, a Korean cooking barbecue pork… I think it's fun. Not only you get to taste each other's cooking, you get to know more about their culture. Hopefully it is as authentic as possible."* (P17/HO/DS/M)

> *"They offered to introduce me to how they made sangria in Spain. They bought ingredients for a sangria and showed me how to make it using Fanta Lemon flavour and cheap wine… even though I was hosting them, it felt like I was having lunch at their place in Spain"* (Reflections made while hosting participants P18/G/DS/M & P19/G/DS/F)

4.1.7. Summary.

The interactions from the analysis indicated that the Couchsurfing interactions under study were reciprocal in nature. There were many ways that Couchsurfers chose to reciprocate. In essence, sometimes there was a reciprocal exchange that was more tangible in nature and other times, a reciprocal exchange was more social in nature. Couchsurfers preferred it when the reciprocal response emerged spontaneously. The results also showed that giving back was often self-initiated. This internal need to give back and the fact that the reciprocal responses were ongoing and continuous, were essential to the exchange dynamic that would form between host and guest. These ongoing tangible reciprocal responses provided opportunities to communicate and exchange stories. These social interactions were a form of reciprocal exchange because there was an opportunity to benefit from the social interaction. These benefits will be discussed later in this chapter.

Another dynamic that emerged during the reciprocal exchange in Couchsurfing was that there were individuals who wanted to continue the reciprocal exchange with their hosts or guests after the Couchsurfing experience. For others, the reciprocity could not always be fulfilled during the initial host-guest interaction. For these individuals, they chose to continue to give back to someone new in another Couchsurfing setting or outside of Couchurfing. This latter form of extending the reciprocity to others in the community could be a possible key reason for the sustainability of Couchsurfing or any environment where there is a reliance on the social exchange.

4.2. Exploring measures that Couchsurfers used to ensure that the interaction was reciprocal

4.2.1. Determining the adequacy of the reciprocal response.

The perceived value of the provision or what is given back was subjective. There were various tangible and non-tangible ways of giving back during an interaction. The tangible objects that were exchanged included, among others, a meal, drinks, a place to stay, or a gift. The exchanges that were non-tangible included social conversations, spending time together, experiences, or knowledge, among others. The value of each of these was left up to the subjectivity of each individual.

> *"He showed me so much about what he has done on his travels. He told me about the scams and what I need to remember in China… I felt like I gained from just having these learnt something new from these conversations."* (Reflections while hosting participant P01/G/DS/M)

This meant that any one of the previously mentioned ways of giving back (e.g. showing appreciation, helping around the house, minimising the burden on the host) could have been enough to recognise the value of the provision. However, there were guests who had felt that they needed to contribute sufficiently to the exchange as their means of giving back, even if the provision was just based on a place to stay.

"I just make sure I relate a bit to them. I will cook for them every once in a while. I will share stories. We'll have fun together and I stay for free… so that's good for me." (P12/G/DS/F)

The subjective value associated to the provision, or the returned favour also promulgated further contributions to continue the exchange. This was to the extent where exchange partners may have tried to out-give each other.

"In gifting communities, I find that people try to out-give each other." (P05/HO/DS/M)

Another dynamic was that there were Couchsurfers who were also budget travellers. Therefore, as a guest, they were limited by what they could give back tangibly. Couchsurfers only being able to do the little they could do during an interaction. This made it seem like the provisions made during the interaction far outweighed what they were able to give in return.

"At some point I didn't know what to say because I didn't expect this. It's something you just can't expect. It's not normal. I did not expect this to happen. And, of course, I was really thankful… Somehow felt a little bit bad because I felt there was not much I could give back. I was just a little bit overwhelmed." (P04/G/PS/M)

While it was not explicitly spoken about during the interviews, there was a tolerance for guests who were either new to the environment or those who gave back what they could. If the individual was new to Couchsurfing, they needed to demonstrate to the community that they had the same values by recognising the reciprocal nature of the community. This was often done by first hosting and providing to others before trying to benefit from using the platform while travelling. There was more allowance for this sort of behaviour in Couchsurfing because it was about recognising the value of reciprocity as opposed to intentionally trying to benefit for one's self.

"To start discovering the community and giving, before trying to receive. And that's something I don't like when I see people having created a profile in one day.... never tried

(hosting) before sending you a request, which is like in the worst case. The worst one I had was like, 'Is your room free on that day because I would like to use it?' I just wanted to say, 'Fuck off, I'm not a hotel.'" (P15/G/DS/M)

Regarding the treatment of those who could only give back what they could, a possible reason for this tolerance was associated with the subjective experiential benefit the interaction offered, or an empathy for being on a tight budget, or being like-minded and knowing the individual was likely to pass on the gain to another.

"Gift it to other people who share a common interest, the same as you… A gift is more powerful when it remains entirely a gift… it's kind of passing on the gift that I've received previously." (P05/HO/DS/M)

Despite the little that these individuals could have contributed to return the favour to their host, there was an opportunity to still give back by giving to others and living up to the reciprocal values of the Couchsurfing community.

"(After all these Couchsurfing experiences) I feel the need to give back to the Couchsurfing community… host myself and that is something I would still really enjoy to do… host travellers myself." (P04/G/PS/M)

"He said, 'You received, now bear in mind and think of the (Couchsurfing) community… we have a common bank account.'" (P15/G/DS/M)

In one example, a Couchsurfer mentioned that after their travels they wanted to host Couchsurfers when they returned after they felt like they had not given sufficiently back to their hosts. During the continued follow-up conversation during the member-checking process, it appeared that this individual had hosted more than double the amount of Couchsurfers compared

to when he got hosted. Furthermore, he had continued to give back despite not seeming to use the platform again to be hosted.

> *"Helped them realise that there are people who give a lot and they can't give back equally in return during each stay. They mentioned that they would give back to Couchsurfing by hosting others when they return to Belgium.'"* (Reflections while hosting participant P11/G/DS/M)

4.2.2. Not everyone experiences the need to return the favour

There was an individual who differed from how others behaved in the Couchsurfing environment. It appeared that his intentions to gain and benefit from the environment were more obvious. Sometimes he chose to provide more as a host because it created opportunities for them to use the environment as a guest in the future for his own benefit and not feel that he needed to give back to their hosts.

> *(P16/G/DS/M): "I had welcomed [hosted] many people, between the first time and the second time. So the second time, when I asked for people [sent a request], they could see I had solid references. And the second time it was in Britain in Manchester and I had asked three people... because I was staying one week for a language class… and once again, I paid nothing. It was not that much lack of money because I had at that time, I was working. But because they didn't let me. So, you know, it was Couchsurfing."*
>
> *(Researcher): Did you ever offer or like the first experience, did you just offer once and then the guy said no what happened?*

(P16/G/DS/M): No, it's just that it did not present itself because I would go to class and come back and we would eat and then back and forth and then one day, one of the guys had a day off. So he invited me to go out for drinks and he bought me drinks all day. That's what he did."

(Researcher): "And you never felt a need to give back?"

(P16/G/DS/M): "To be frank, not really."

4.2.3. When the interaction felt one-sided or the host felt used.

Couchsurfers looked for behaviours that resembled a motive to reciprocate. They had something in excess (i.e. a spare room) that if they offered it to someone else, it would become something mutually beneficial to both individuals. The host or guest felt hard done-by when these individuals were not forthcoming with a reciprocal response.

"And if there is not (reciprocation), you're very grumpy." (P02/H/DS/F)

"I've heard a lot of stories… where the Couchsurfer is kind of taking advantage and sees it as a cheap place to stay... they would prefer there's no interaction actually. And that makes it a bit unfair for the host, I think, sometimes. And well, it's just a very difficult thing if you think about it. It's two-sided and sometimes the guest doesn't want to have contact." (P11/G/DS/M)

"We invited her (our host) to go to the bar… We gave her and her boyfriend a beer and then she was like, 'we will give you a beer back.' …And then in the end, they left suddenly. And they didn't even give us one back." (P12/G/DS/F)

Couchsurfers were looking for behaviours that resembled selflessness. This sense-check was done as early as the request that was being sent out – and continued throughout the interaction.

"Please don't make it [the request] about yourself. Make it about the host."

(P08/GH/PS/M)

There was an example where the researcher was actively participating in Couchsurfing as a guest. For the researcher, he felt like he did spend some time socialising with the host. However, for the host, this was not enough. The host wanted something more to the exchange – including a simple gesture of gifting was expected. After the interaction, the host was displeased with the interaction and left a negative reference. The below dialogue from the in-depth interview with this Couchsurfer gave perspective of how the lack of reciprocation during the exchange left her feeling wanting as a host – and how she articulated her perception of not experiencing any benefit.

(Researcher): "So, do you feel that you were giving and I was not returning?"

(P02/H/DS/F): "Yes… Yes. I have to say exacerbated by the fact that you came completely empty handed. Now it is all fair and well to come empty handed to a person that you have never met in your life before but then you met this person and you really don't have any idea what you bring as a gift. You really have no idea because you can't read this person or whatever. You bring something to the equation. ... I mean, something as small a little fridge magnet from wherever it is that you're from. You just don't rock up, drop down your stuff, do your own thing and then say I'm done. No. I would think that is very bad manners on any level. Except if

you go to a hotel. If you go to a hotel and you pay for a room, you are under no obligation. But that is not what you did. That is not what you did and I was doubly upset. You portrayed yourself as being this fabulous Couchsurfer and ended up, if I can be blunt, to be somebody looking for free accommodation, who I don't really think gave anything back. Not even as much as a fridge magnet. It's all very fair and well if you are with a friend you haven't seen for long and you would rather spend the time with your friend than with me, that's cool. That's cool. But you didn't portray that upfront. If you had said upfront, this is my set up. You did say that your friend's here only for a week, which is fine. I don't have a problem with it. And, if you had been open and upfront, 'I won't have much time, I won't be able to chat with you, cook with you, do whatever with you, maybe next time.' I could have had the choice, bugger this, I am not interested. You see what I'm saying?"

In another example, the guests used the washing machine in the house without permission. The washing machine broke which suggested to the host that there was an absence of respect during a Couchsurfing engagement. This created a break in the relationship and the possibility for reciprocation diminished.

"They screwed up the washing machine. Just because they didn't know, and they didn't ask. These little things." (P03/G/PS/M)

In the end, Couchsurfers still want to experience some sort of return from the Couchsurfing encounter. It was sometimes difficult to explain why an experience was not what

other Couchsurfing experiences were like. When these interactions with guests did not satisfy the host, they often felt like the interaction became *one-sided* and required effort.

> *"Nothing wrong with him… it felt like we were just being used for our accommodation."* (P03/G/PS/M)

> *"You get a gut feeling that they're taking advantage of the situation."* (P05/HO/DS/M)

4.2.4. Communicating their expectations of a mutually beneficial exchange.

There was a fine line between communicating general expectations and being prescriptive in an environment about the voluntary reciprocity that was required. As a result, there were unspoken expectations around being sociable and needing to voluntarily reciprocate. If these expectations were not communicated, it was because there was supposed to be a common understanding of mutual respect. However, when needing to communicate these expectations, it had not come easily to Couchsurfers. They were concerned that they could disrupt the natural flow of the social exchange or offend their fellow Couchsurfer. In addition, it could communicate that they were participating in Couchsurfing to only gain.

> *"People don't communicate up front and I think people may be afraid of hurting each other's feelings or they simply don't know that communication is the key to an excellent experience … But some hosts have far more expectations, I've learned, than others. Some have expectations that the visitor or the surfer will bring them presents. Some seem to have unwritten rules, some seem to have written rules. Some seem to have expectations that the Couchsurfer will clean my house, will wash all my dishes, will do all sorts of things. Others seem to have no expectations at all. And those hosts who inform you in advance of a lengthy, lengthy list of rules, in my view, are to be avoided… It seems like*

it's just too much effort. I mean particularly if your perspective is, you're doing this for intercultural understanding and to get to know others. That's what you should be doing. You're not doing it to save money." (P08/GH/PS/M)

The concerns around not communicating expectations were to avoid disrupting the natural flow of the reciprocal exchange or getting negative references at the end of the exchange. The more experienced Couchsurfers resorted to addressing their expectations in limited ways. Couchsurfers often managed their expectations upfront so that they could ascertain whether the host or guest wanted to stay-in, exchange, hang-out, speak, explore, help, cook, etc. This avoided any unpleasantries that could occur during the exchange and if they wanted, they did not have to host or stay with the individual.

"I do discuss with the host ahead of time to manage my own expectations, which although they are minimal. I do need to know will I be sleeping on the floor because when I'm sleeping on the floor, I should bring something with me to sleep on… and you know, just having friendly discussions ahead of time such as you know, what can I do if I'm going to a host's house to make things easy for them. What time should I arrive at their house? How can I actually find their house? … So you as the host need to suss it out from the surfer. You as the surfer need to suss it out from the host. If you don't do that ahead of time, you may have misunderstandings and misunderstandings can lead to negative references." (P08/GH/PS/M)

These experienced Couchsurfers also had certain expectations that they included on their Couchsurfing profile. This was to ensure that their hosting experiences were more pleasant and met their expectations of someone they would get along with.

(Researcher): "You have something in your profile that specifically, you want people to read through the profile and quote. Why is that?"

(P17/HO/DS/M): "I only had that thing like 2 months back. I think it was when I started to get a lot of requests and I mean, our time is limited and I think it would be nice for people to send a really genuine request rather than having to copy and paste while just looking for accommodation. So in order to, not to feel so ruthless… if you have read through my profile, I would seriously consider you. But if it's just a copy and paste, I wouldn't feel so bad if I just reject it without giving you any reasons. I mean, it's just a matter of filtering but of course, even if you don't quote that thing but you have somehow written a very personalised request, I will still consider it."

When the host or the guest began to feel uncomfortable or that certain basics of the reciprocal interaction were neglected during the Couchsurfing exchange, eventually that individual was likely to speak up and communicate their expectations. In this below example, an unspoken expectation of reciprocation was eventually verbalised. The Couchsurfer was called out for not displaying a form of reciprocity. After verbalising the expectation, the host had altered their Couchsurfing profile to remind future guests that he expected a reciprocal interaction should he host them.

(P16/G/DS/M): "It did get a bit complicated because when I arrived, I felt sick immediately because of the plane or something. So I was sleeping all the time. And something very funny also is that I said, I would stay 3 days but it turned out (that) I stayed like one week. All the time sleeping, sleeping,

sleeping. But I was with the other people and it was very cold outside. So we stayed in the house all the time, exchanging experiences. So it was very nice actually."

(Researcher): "What sort of experiences were you exchanging?"

(P16/G/DS/M): "How the Chinese girl should explain to me that she is from Taiwan... She would explain to me how it is with her very stressful job and everything. And there was a girl from Belgium, but she studied Polish … with [host's name], he had lots of areas of interest, like dancing, like traveling… it was good because it allowed me to discover how other people lived and how, what other people's experiences were."

(Researcher): "Okay and given that you were getting all these experiences.... What did you do? Did you contribute back into that environment or what happened?"

(P16/G/DS/M): "That time it was an issue because I stayed one week at this guy's (host's name), and we are still friends, but after I left he had written a chart [Couchsurfing profile disclaimer] for those who will come to the apartment. He said, 'If you want to come here, you won't sleep all the time. For example, if I go and get groceries, you will have to contribute. If I cook, at least do the dishes.' … All these things, they were directed at me."

This provided an indication that the mere gesture or insistence of wanting to reciprocate was not enough. There was an unspoken expectation that there should have been a greater

willingness to fulfil on the reciprocation through an action or a deed – and not just the offer or gesture of wanting to reciprocate.

> *"Twice I had offered him to contribute. He said, 'No.' And when he said no, I didn't insist so much… He said, 'No, I didn't insist so much.' So, during the whole week he had paid for me… he would buy bread and we would share that's most what it came down to… I truly offered to pay for the half, and he said, no… But afterwards, he wrote it on the chart [Couchsurfing profile] like, 'People should contribute.' … I would've insisted more, that's the thing or I would've offered him a present in the end, like to thank him and to show that I was not there to be a freeloader or something."* (P16/G/DS/M)

4.2.5. Cross-cultural experiences of communicating expectations of a reciprocal exchange.

There were cross-cultural experiences where guests felt that their hosts were not afraid to voice their desire to receive something in return for hosting them. This overt form of communicating their expectations for a reciprocal response was evident among Tanzanian and Mozambiquan hosts. This was perplexing for their Couchsurfing guests (i.e. Belgian, Canadian, and Iranian). During the in-depth interviews, these Couchsurfers complained about their former hosts because the reciprocal exchange had stopped feeling natural and it became a forced, bartered experience.

> *"In Africa sometimes, they really expect something back… It was our first Couchsurfing experience in Africa… it didn't end up that well… then when she needed to get food, she was like, 'Okay I can cook for you but give me some money to do the groceries.' And then*

she made like a huge pile of food. She gave us a little and the rest was for them in the next few days… where I felt like they were extorting us." (P11/G/DS/M)

"Definitely more of I'm giving you this but what can I get in return… it made me uncomfortable unnecessarily… It was kind of like a must that we hang out. 'Are you giving us this experience or are you making this experience for us?'" (P13/G/DS/F)

4.2.6. Summary.

Members understood that there would be some form of reciprocal exchange that happened during a Couchsurfing interaction. The subjective experience of the reciprocal response was essential to continue the reciprocity during the exchange. There was also a tolerance towards new members and budget travellers when hosting them. These new members or budget travellers felt like they could not reciprocate sufficiently back to their hosts. As such, after those Couchsurfing experiences, they felt they could fulfil on their need to reciprocate by giving back to others in the Couchsurfing community when they had the means to do so. However, not everyone was exempt from not reciprocating sufficiently. An issue arose when Couchsurfing hosts needed to manage expectations of what they wanted from the exchange. When they encountered a non-reciprocating guest, there were hosts who resorted to stating the obvious (need for reciprocation) either directly to their guest during the Couchsurfing experience or they posted it on their own profiles. Similarly, the cross-cultural experience of being told by their hosts how they needed to return the favour was confusing and did not hold the reciprocal values they were used to from other Couchsurfing experiences. The impact of these managed expectations will be discussed later in this chapter.

4.3. Determining whether altruism affected the social nature of the Couchsurfing interaction

4.3.1. Perceived altruism in Couchsurfing.

Part of the investigation was also to explore how altruism revealed itself within the Couchsurfing context. There was a perception among those who believed that their participation in Couchsurfing was altruistic.

> *"True altruism exists… when I'm accepting guests, I'm giving my time. I don't expect them to actually give me back directly."* (P07/HO/DS/M)

> *"I am giving with no expectation of anything… There is no expectation that there will be a friendship or there will be a rewarding experience."* (P08/GH/PS/M)

> *"I don't really like hosting but I like to help people… I don't know, it's always been like that."* (P16/G/DS/M)

The way guests described their hosts from Couchsurfing suggested that these hosts could have been approaching these interactions altruistically. It was often the minimal actions in the beginning of the face-to-face interaction that suggested that there was a forthcoming approach from hosts where they were not expecting anything in return or seeking to gain from the Couchsurfing experience.

> *"And then you showed me the space. You did your own thing. Like you didn't overcrowd me and you didn't seem to be overcrowded by me. So I felt comfortable quite quickly and I think that that made it easy to navigate and be myself and like cook my food and all*

those things. Not feel like I had to be in a room or I had to be out or anything like that." (P13/G/DS/F)

This experience of altruism was also based on how hospitable their hosts were during each Couchsurfing encounter. These individuals recognised that their hosts were providing more than a 'free' roof over their heads. This meant that hosts went out of their way to receive their guest. They ensured the environment was clean, and made their guest feel at home.

"Because you are not exchanging one thing which has not tangible cash value for another… you're offering me free hospitality." (P08/GH/PS/M)

"Welcome them, wash all the stuff to be sure that they would be okay and comfortable." (P16/G/DS/M)

Couchsurfing hosts also acknowledged that they went out of their way to make their guests feel comfortable. For these hosts, they also entertained their guests. They created these immersive experiences by showing them around their hometown and discussing what it meant to them. This action offered the guest a unique experience of the local way of life.

"Durban has got it's inner beauty. It's the story about the eye-of-the-beholder. And that's what Durban has and that's what I would like to share with you. I would like to take you to Durban, I would like to take you to one of four or five places that I love... and that will be different. For instance, if you go to the inner city, there are some beautiful places there. Which you, as an average tourist, might never go to… I would like them to see what I see." (P02/H/DS/F)

These hospitable actions by hosts were recalled by Couchsurfers as being overly generous. This was because the host exceeded the expectations of their guest by providing more than just accommodation.

> *"I found a lot of them (hosts) being very generous… you were probably one of the most generous people that I've met."* (P04/G/PS/M)

> *"I didn't believe that people can be so generous at opening themselves and giving their home to others… People are really more generous than I expect."* (P14/G/DS/M)

Not everyone saw the generosity and hospitality in the same way. There were those who disagreed that altruism existed in Couchsurfing. Their experience of their Couchsurfing counterparts was that there was always a need to return the favour or there had to be something in it for them.

> *"My main answer would be no [to altruism in Couchsurfing]… people are not doing that… [people] want some image or value because they want to host a lot and show it to others… acquire some image in the local community."* (P15/G/DS/M)

This generosity created confusion among some guests because they had not reciprocated before the next set of provisions were provided. This could explain why there were those who felt that the environments were altruistic and hospitable.

> *"They don't ask you for anything, which is super weird. I'm used to a world where something is always expected of you… almost never seen good deeds happen without something in return."* (P13/G/DS/F)

It must be noted at this point that the generosity and the hospitality that was experienced related to tangible provisions in these environments. Perhaps, without realising it, guests were receiving these provisions and not realising that the opportunity for the social exchange was what hosts were experiencing in return. Having stated this, Couchsurfers still responded to the generosity in the environment. This generosity by the hosts fuelled the natural *feeling* to give back. Therefore, individuals found themselves giving back more – which spurred the host to contribute their hospitality further to their guests. This constant overly generosity by both sides was not perceived negatively but rather as part of the reciprocal nature of the environment

> *"You actually almost feel bad that you've received so much, that you actually are compelled to give more. And I think that is kind of more sustained because of the relationship of trust and the intentions that you realise the people around you have."* (P05/HO/DS/M)

If the nature of the interaction in Couchsurfing was altruistic, then this potentially added another dynamic to understanding and explaining these interactions between host and guest. A possible answer to this potential predicament between whether altruism and reciprocity existing in the same environment, was found in the consistency of how Couchsurfers described their interactions during their one-on-one discussions. When the person felt that the interaction was altruistic, in a different part of the conversation they then mentioned that there needed to be something forthcoming from their guests. Using (P08/GH/PS/M) as an example, they claimed to have no expectations but then in another part of their conversation, they stated an expectation of how the guest could have respected their house rules.

> *"Now some people seem to think when you make your pitch, you want to offer something tangible. So hey, I can cook you a great meal. Which you know, I don't give a rat's ass*

about, I couldn't care less. I don't even want them my kitchen. I've made it perfectly clear. They're not going to be cooking for me because I don't want that in a very small kitchen." (P08/GH/PS/M)

Continuing with the example (P08/GH/PS/M), they mentioned that a reciprocated gesture would make the experience more worthwhile. This suggested that a voluntary reciprocal relationship was more beneficial to the Couchsurfing experience.

"…what can I do if I'm going to a host's house to make things easy for them… I think you bring something of yourself. I mean, first of all, most experiences, you don't stay more than two nights. Usually you don't. I mean, you may come back and visit several times and you may actually reciprocate with the visit… which is wonderful when that actually happens… phenomenal in fact." (P08/GH/PS/M)

4.3.2. Cross-cultural experiences of hospitality and perceived altruism.

This generosity by the host was part of the cultural norm of inviting guests into their homes. There were guests who perceived the hospitality to be overly generous. This was a common theme mentioned by Couchsurfers who were either Iranian hosts or Couchsurfers who had travelled and been hosted in Iran. One of the participants gave an example of an interaction between their host and themselves. The host was overly generous, and it left them feeling uncomfortable. This discomfort was largely associated with them wanting to return the favour, but they had limited resources to do so.

"He really wanted to give and give and give… 'No, no, no, you are my guests. I pay for you.'… We felt kind of bad, it was expensive." (P11/G/DS/M)

During the fieldwork, the researcher travelled to Iran to understand this cultural hospitable norm in Iran further. As a Couchsurfing guest when visiting Iranian households, the researcher became aware of concept in Iran called *Ta-arof.* The idea is that a host extends their gratitude of a person coming to visit them by being hospitable and generous. Hosts in Iran also insist that they do not want their guests to *give back* during the interaction – no matter how often the guest insists on returning the favour. However, there were two parts to understanding the custom of *Ta-arof.* The first is that it implies a gesture of hospitality and does not mean that the recipient of the gesture needed to accept the offer. Rather, the gesture entailed goodwill and showing gratitude for visiting them. The second part of the custom is that if the favour is to be returned, it should be done voluntarily. While this generous behaviour from the host was associated to a cultural norm called *Ta-arof*, the one-sided nature of the interaction was not ideal because the guests felt guilty for receiving in excess.

"You do feel that it's one-sided… And then in Iran, we had to almost get into a fight to be able to share the costs because he really wanted to give and give and give and every time in the beginning it was like, 'No, you're my guests. I'll pay for you.' And then we felt kind of bad because it was expensive." (P11/G/DS/M)

Another Couchsurfer spoke about the cultural differences between him and his wife in terms of hosting. His wife was Korean while he was an American. It appeared that in Asian cultures, it was important to go above-and-beyond as a host, whereas, the American Couchsurfer felt that a host was already giving their hospitality and had not needed to provide any further.

"Now for [wife's name], who hasn't done much as a guest but has done a lot more hosting, but she's got her own framework of what it means to host. So, if somebody is going to stay here, she wanted to cook for them and really kind of go all out. Whereas

[for me], you're giving… you're already giving somebody a lot just by offering, you're opening up your home and giving your place for free. You don't need to spend an hour cooking." (P03/G/PS/M)

There was also a cultural norm where the Couchsurfing guest also took on the role of the provider during the relationship. This switch in roles was informed by a cultural norm or a responsibility of being older in the relationship. Further to this, the role of the host became the recipient to the actions of the guest, who became the provider.

"Since we are older than he is that we will invite him out to dinner. That's the proper thing to do" (P08/GH/PS/M)

4.3.3. The concept of sharing in Couchsurfing and what Couchsurfers meant by sharing.

The term *sharing* was used frequently to describe the social exchange during the interaction between the host and the guest. From the below examples, *sharing* could be likened to the altruistic or hospitable actions.

"I really have those vibes, those Couchsurfing vibes inside… really want to share… People are caring, and sharing, and stuff." (P15/G/DS/M)

"I don't have like this European mentality because it's very much like this in some parts… this European mentality where they calculate everything they give... if you know me, I care to share with people… [Unlike] this sweet girl who came to my place that I've hosted. When we travelled together, we had train tickets, but she calculated to the cent, like what was her part and what was mine... but she stayed at my place for four days." (P16/G/DS/M)

Sharing was used to describe the moments that both host and guest spent together. It was about being in each other's company and spending time together getting to know one another. This involved telling the other person about a personal account or a relatable story. As such, sharing was about creating moments and experiences together.

> *"People are hosting just to share things, like moments or talks… they're not expecting something from you."* (P01/G/DS/M)
>
> *"If you as the average tourist comes to Durban, chances are you will never meet my Salsa community or chances are remote that you will see the places I would take you to. So it's a sharing of experiences for me. So, your experiences wherever you've been and whatever you do. And I will share my experience and Durban with you."* (P02/H/DS/F)

However, the nuances around sharing, as described during the conversations, was more reciprocal in nature. Spending time together was already about both the host and the guest gaining from the social nature of the interaction that took place in Couchsurfing. The perceived gain from the time spent together might not be as obvious because there was a natural willingness from both individuals to engage in those experiences. Thus, sharing could be an extension of voluntarily reciprocating, as explained earlier.

4.3.4. Summary.

There were two key insights to altruism in the Couchsurfing context based on what was presented on this research question around whether altruism affected the social nature of the Couchsurfing interaction. The first was that it depended on how someone understood what altruism was about. The second was that Couchsurfing hosts were experienced as hospitable and generous. In the context of cultural differences, there were cultural norms around hospitality

where individuals behaved in an altruistic and hospitable manner. However, Couchsurfers acknowledged that they wanted to return the favour and reciprocate regardless of this generous hospitality. There were some benefits to the generosity in the environment because it ensured that the reciprocity continued both during and after the exchange.

The confusion around altruism and reciprocity in the context of Couchsurfing was that some might not have recognised that the social aspect of the exchange was part of reciprocation. The answer to this confusion became evident when sharing was explored as a concept – and what it meant to Couchsurfers. If hosts did not expect anything tangible in return (and it was dictated by the cultural norms), the reciprocal relationship was satisfied by the social aspects of the exchange (e.g. shared moments created by the time spent together).

4.4. Understanding how both individuals in the exchange maximised their benefits

4.4.1. Couchsurfing was not really about the free accommodation.

The illusion of *free* accommodation had not lasted long. During the interviews, Couchsurfers used the word *cheap* as opposed to the word *free*. Despite the semantics changing, members still acknowledged Couchsurfing as an affordable means to travel on a shoestring budget for longer.

"We can travel cheaper, longer." (P19/G/DS/F)

More importantly, this mindset became common among Couchsurfing members. By recognising that the accommodation was not for *free*, guests were willing to incur costs during their Couchsurfing encounters. These costs were voluntary reciprocal responses to what was provided by the host in the environment. To showcase their sense of reciprocity, some of the costs the guest incurred included the gifts or the groceries that they purchased.

"If you're trying to be a good guest, you pay for things as well… it's cheaper than (other) accommodation but you bring a small gift or you buy groceries or whatever it is that you're going to do." (P03/G/PS/M)

Sometimes the expenses were more than staying at alternative options, like a hostel or AirBnB. While the guest could have resented incurring the extra costs, they acknowledged that it was the risk they took.

"You're not doing this to save money… I don't look at Couchsurfing as saving money… Couchsurfing has cost me money rather than save me money." (P08/GH/PS/M)

"And then I feel like I'm sleeping on the floor and it's not even that comfortable. And in the end, we ended up paying for all their food and paying for all this and that… we could have taken a cheap hotel instead… Sometimes they want to take you expensive places and then, we want to share the costs. But for us, it's like, 'Uh damn, that's expensive.' In Oman, we had that. Our guest took us to a bar, and we paid like 16 euros for a beer… We could have gotten a hostel for the same price." (P11/G/DS/M)

This risk was offset by the additional benefits that the reciprocal exchange afforded them. Individuals were looking to maximise from other social and experiential benefits in the Couchsurfing environment despite losing out on some material costs (e.g. spending more money than on formal accommodation).

"It won't be absolutely cheaper, but I treat it (Couchsurfing) more as a bonus for me… to actually live (immerse) myself into the culture… and these are bonuses which you can't buy in a hotel or hostel." (P14/G/DS/M)

4.4.2. Benefits of the reciprocal interaction that enhanced the Couchsurfing experience.

The identification of the themes that related to how individuals maximised their benefits from the interaction were often evident in the expectations that Couchsurfers had about the environment; or when they spoke about the experiences with other guests or hosts; or when the participants discussed the benefits from the environment. To understand these benefits, there were specific outcomes from the exchange that enhanced the Couchsurfing experience.

4.4.2.1. Sense of belonging through like-minded connections.

A prominent theme that emerged, as it related to the benefits of the interaction, was the like-mindedness of the community and the sense of belonging that an individual felt as a result of connecting to someone like-minded. People were brought together because of their similar interests, their similar sense of humour, and their similar personalities.

> *"Surprisingly, I found that all the Couchsurfers were quite similar… Not all of them but there were some similarities between all of them."* (P04/G/PS/M)

> *"It wasn't so much about the gifting but actually the relationship that developed… had similar objectives and interests, a mutual playing ground."* (P05/HO/DS/M)

> *"Really connect… we're interested in the same things… Talking for hours every day… We seem to like the same sort of stuff, same sort of interests in terms of history and politics."* (P09/G/DS/M)

Couchsurfers also actively searched for people with similar interests so that they could connect better. This benefitted them because they felt a sense of belonging while being away from home. There were those who wanted to find comfort among those who have a similar mindset because it can also become a support system for them. It was this relatedness that allowed Couchsurfers to feel a connection both during and after the interaction.

> *"Like in 2009 and '10, early on it was really great and easy. And you could do these targeted searches. Like I'd be wherever I'm going, and I'd put in Korea or I'd put in punk rock. And then we'd find people. With this one couple we stayed with in Taiwan... I had put in Korea and it turned out she was a graduate, she was from Korea and he was a grad student in anthropology. And I was like, right, and they had a kid… And so, we spent 4 days with them at Christmas. And all of us are still connected."* (P03/G/PS/M)

"There is a benefit of getting the person into your circle of friends, if they're like-minded, because there are other social aspects… it's a support stream." (P05/HO/DS/M)

"The first thing I do when I get into someone's home, I may not be very polite.... I start pulling out books from the bookshelf and reading them and that tells me a lot about the person, and which interests we share and which interests we do not share." (P09/G/DS/M)

Connecting to people with like-minded interests and beliefs ensured that the host and the guest felt less alone in this world. This connection gave them a sense of belonging and a relatedness to a community where they felt a common purpose.

"It's inward fulfilling to think you're with a group of other people. We were all on our own… since we started networking with other people, you feel like you're part of something bigger than yourself." (P06/HO/DS/M)

4.4.2.2. Momentary connections that alleviated loneliness.

Host were provided an opportunity to feel less lonely when they connected with fellow community members. This also benefitted travellers, especially solo travellers, because they found company and companionship during their journey.

"I use Couchsurfing mostly when I travel by myself, like alone. And, that's what made Couchsurfing, otherwise I would never have been travelling by myself. I am really shy. I am not comfortable travelling alone. I've been travelling many times alone but still I'm not comfortable travelling alone… I don't feel comfortable alone. Like even at home, like used to live in a, a flat share all the time." (P01/G/DS/M)

"I value the human interaction obviously now that the children are gone and the room is empty… A part of it is also company. Not that I expect the Couchsurfers to accompany me, to keep me company because I can keep my own. But it's certainly, you plan to do something together." (P02/H/DS/F)

The benefit that a generous host experienced in return was the fact that there was some social company. This again suggested that these individuals were not hosting because they were truly altruistic but rather, there was something socially beneficial in it for them too.

"I've been staying with a lot of wonderful hosts and they've been giving and giving and giving and I think a lot of them, they do it because they enjoy the people, the company of other people … they like talking." (P09/G/DS/M)

The theme around Couchsurfing offering some sort of alleviation from loneliness was further evident among respondents who used Couchsurfing while working away from their hometown. Being based in a foreign country for work for three to four years at a time, they used Couchsurfing during that time while working abroad to have companionship. However, the platform became less relevant to them when they returned to their home countries. The reason they did not use Couchsurfing when back in the home countries was because they had an established network of friends there and they had not needed to resort to Couchsurfing to feel less lonely.

"It breaks the monotony of my routine and I get to know new people instead of just focusing on the usual. If I'm based in my hometown, I am not sure whether I will be as active (hosting on Couchsurfing). Maybe I would but you already have your own circles of friends to go around…" (P17/HO/DS/M)

4.4.2.3. Momentary connections to just connect and bond.

There were Couchsurfers who reiterated that meeting people through Couchsurfing offered them the potential of a social bond, despite that it was momentary. This social bond was the catalyst to an interaction that unfolded and created experiences, emotions and memories.

> *"Genuinely interested in getting to know you and your story… I wanted to get to know you as a person and to also share my own life and my own ideas… my own thoughts that I have formulated through the course of my life. It's why I feel like making that connection between those two people. I feel that that's something that I wanted it to do."* (P10/G/DS/M)

> *"Because I want to meet honestly. Of course, I save money but I could afford the place if I really want to… I really feel what I want, what I don't want and why want to meet people… it makes the experiences I have on Couchsurfing better."* (P15/G/DS/M)

These social bonds were short enough to refuel and reenergise the community members. However, the time spent together during the Couchsurfing interaction was not enough to form deep, meaningful connections. More so, members were constantly meeting and interacting with someone new in the community – and thus, they could not form strong connections with everyone they met. Therefore, once the interaction had ended, the potential to stay in contact had never materialised.

> *"Cannot have strong bonds or get attached with everybody."* (P15/G/DS/M)

> *"Spent like two hours speaking with somebody, even if you won't be best friends after."* (P15/G/DS/M)

Couchsurfers also understood the difficulty in connecting further after the Couchsurfing experience. There were Couchsurfers who mentioned that it was hard to maintain these friendships after some time. However, during the Couchsurfing experience, they felt a social bond and it made their travelling experiences more authentic.

> *"All these friendships which may not last very long… doesn't mean they are not genuine."* (P09/G/DS/M)

> *"You get to socialise in order to get to know each other more. But then because Couchsurfing is a very short experience, you can't stay with the guy for a whole week or month. At least I didn't do it yet. But I believe that if you stayed with that guy for a long time, then sometimes you become like life buddies."* (P14/G/DS/M)

4.4.2.4. Meaningful connections that led to long-term friendships being formed.

There were also those who found benefit in keeping some connections on-going and forming long-term friendships. A description by one individual likened the friendships formed through Couchsurfing "*like quasi-family members."* (P03/G/PS/M). Couchsurfers preferred to come away from most interactions knowing that there was a friendship that had formed. Friendships were important to them because it connected them to those who behave and think like them. For Couchsurfers, it was to the point that they felt like they were collecting friendships.

> *"It gives me a collection of friends. Like people usually doing the same things that I do."* (P01/G/DS/M)

Couchsurfers recounted having become friends with someone living in another part of the world. It was important for them, as a traveller, to feel connected to the places they visit,

especially once they have moved on to another destination. By having friends in a foreign city, it leaves them feeling like they belong to a global community.

> *"I met some really fascinating people, some really lovely people… I made some good friends. And I am in a position to say that if I went to any of those people's countries, I'll have a home to go to."* (P02/H/DS/F)

> *"I treasure personal relationships very much. I would try to retain a relationship from every country. And that's a very valuable thing that you can get from travelling."* (P14/G/DS/M)

There were Couchsurfers who dedicated effort into developing those momentary connections into genuine friendships. The time between hosting and meeting had not mattered. There was a common experience that both individuals had had that allowed them to connect again in the future.

> *"I know you cannot stay in touch with everybody (you meet) but then you still have a good memory of somebody. You can really say, 'Oh, let's meet again.' ... For a year and a half, we'd spoken like three times... and actually we met again in San Francisco."* (P15/G/DS/M)

> *"One of the best (Couchsurfing) experiences I had…. We stayed close… that's the guy I'm going to see in Poland… last time, he bought me drinks all day."* (P16/G/DS/M)

Social media platforms, like Facebook, became useful to Couchsurfers because they used these platforms to maintain their friendships across large distances.

> *"All of us are still connected on Facebook."* (P03/G/PS/M)

However, there was a moment when these friendships diminished after time because the communication faded. However, for the moment that the friendship held up, Couchsurfers claimed that it was meaningful and genuine.

"Now we speak less… I really expected that we would keep in touch, but they never did. Something that saddened me quite." (P16/G/DS/M)

4.4.2.5. Shared experiences enhanced the meaningful connections being formed.

There were opportunities to create a shared experience during the social interaction. When the research participants would refer to a shared experience, this meant that both host and guest engaged in activities that enhanced the connection between them.

"Had lots of quality time… watched movies, we had beers, we connected very well." (P16/G/DS/M)

Often, these experiences were unique to them and could not be replicated because of the individuality that each person brought to the occasion. These unique experiences added to the memorability because it was also something new to the experience. Some of the novel experiences that were discussed included experiencing a new local dish and visiting a place they have never been to before in the host's home city. Several quotes have been included below to illustrate the uniqueness and novelty of each experience.

"I can take you for an experience that will enrich your life and vice versa. And even if we are not talking about ground-breaking experiences, even if we are just talking about Salsa, which you've never even heard about or we're talking about going through to a township for a meal, which is not something that the average person will do in hurry, it's enriching. I have been to an African spaza restaurant type shop which wouldn't occur to

me to go to… The experience was captivating. So that Surfer gave me an experience which enriched my life. And, I think more than that, more than the experiences is the humanity because even if you don't go anywhere and do anything. Maybe you just go and sit on the beach together for a couple of hours. And you have a human interaction and you talk and suddenly you meet someone that you feel connected to, you feel someone that you can share things with that you don't easily share or speak about things you don't easily speak about. That's value. And that is, I believe, inherent on a subconscious level. That is why you choose people. Well let me speak about myself when I speak about anyone else. We all buy into each other's stories. And if I'm not interested in yours and you're not interested in mine then this meeting, this exchange, won't have been a success. But because I believe we subconsciously choose these experiences and choose each other, for lack of a better word... it can be very enriching on both partners." (P02/H/DS/F)

"You have all these friends and you go to Soweto… like man, props to you, absolutely. I've thoroughly enjoyed this experience… You offer cereal and things like that… 'Hey do you wanna hang out with me and my buddy at the bar? I'm going.' Wow, cool, he enjoys my company... So, I've had a terrific experience with that." (P10/G/DS/M)

"Initially I wasn't sure if I was in the mood to go with [P10/G/DS/M] and walk around Soweto with him. I've done it so many times before with my guest that it wouldn't be a new experience for me. However, I was wrong. The experience turned out to be new to me. We went to see the Youth Day celebrations in Soweto in the morning. I only decided that I would go with in the morning to see what I would feel by having this experience with my guest. The day spent in Soweto was awesome… he introduced me to some of the boys he met the previous day." (Reflections while hosting participant P10/G/DS/M)

"And honestly, I spent a wonderful time over there. I enjoyed it to the fullest. I had four nights there. I didn't sleep the last two nights and I slept 14 hours in four days." (P15/G/DS/M)

These unique shared experiences were considered better when the guest met and hung out with the friendship circle of the host. This added some excitement to the experience, and it ensured these individuals gained from the Couchsurfing experience that they would not be able to experience when using another form of accommodation.

"I met your friends and I'm like, wow. I kind of feel like I just moved to the city and I'm new to the city … but it doesn't feel as transient as it does as like when I go to a like a hostel or a hotel" (P10/G/DS/M)

"I usually try, when I host, either to do something with friends of mine in town or at my place or at some friend's place... because when I travel and do Couchsurfing, I really like it when I'm about to go party with their friends." (P15/G/DS/M)

4.4.2.6. Feeling a sense of worth and self-validation in the community.

There were Couchsurfers who wanted to benefit from improving their status in the community or validate their self-worth. There were various points of references that Couchsurfers also used (e.g. number of countries they have done Couchsurfing, number of positive references, number of Couchsurifng friends) to improve their status and worth in the community. Couchsurfers also leveraged off someone else's status in the community after they met, hosted or stayed with that person.

"I was wondering whether status is important to [P15/G/DS/M]… he told me that he went to the Couchsurfing headquarters and mentioned that he worked with the CEO of

Oracle. He also spoke about meeting Couchsurfers who have over 400 references each." (Reflections while hosting participant P15/G/DS/M)

"Some image or value because they want to host a lot and show it to others… acquire some image in the local community… I hosted one guy last year who had 800 references, who put me in touch with one guy with 1400 references." (P15/G/DS/M)

For these individuals, a connection to a global community through Couchsurfing provided access to *rare collectables* that elevated their status in another non-monetary sharing economy. The outcome of their interactions in one non-monetary sharing economy gave them an elevated sense of self-worth in another.

"You start networking with people coming from around the world. We had a lady from Brazil. She gave us an interesting plant to make tea with… They use it in Brazil and we knew about it, so we asked her, 'Please, if you want to gift us something, bring something from where you are from.' Obviously, she drinks it all the time or she uses it all the time. It's freely available. She thinks nothing of it. But to me, it was quite a big gift because now I feel special because I'm one of the only people in my circle of friends and peers that actually has this plant. And so now I have this thing, I want to collect stuff that I don't have." (P05/HO/DS/M)

More importantly, travellers benefitted from Couchsurfing because the interaction gave them direct access to locals. The participants in the research distinguished themselves from the *typical tourist*. This distinction entailed that a Couchsurfer was more authentic in the travel endeavours than someone who used a different form of accommodation, for example, AirBnB or a hostel. This authenticity could only be gained if they, themselves, pursued a less superficial and

more immersive form of travel. Couchsurfing gave them access to a local way of life. This local immersive experience was what validated them to feel like a *traveller* because they got to immerse themselves in the local lifestyle.

> *"I don't want to just do the sightseeing… you see the surface… I want to see what is going on in the culture and how the people thing and how life looks like." (P04/G/PS/M)*

> *"You are losing a lot that you can benefit from because I had both experiences… there is a barrier between you and the people. You don't get to touch it [the culture]."* (P07/HO/DS/M)

> *"A lot of vacationers will go to a beach and they'll stay there for two weeks and then go back home. They didn't even see the country… It's just what they do to get away from their life … you know what you're going back to."* (P13/G/DS/F)

4.4.2.7. Gaining knowledge that broadened their perspective.

Couchsurfing members described themselves and others in the community as curious, open and having a keen interest to learn.

> *"Most of the people were also very open-minded. They were willing to learn and willing to approach new people they have never seen before… willing to hear stories or share experiences."* (P04/G/PS/M)

The world was a place filled with mystery and diversity for Couchsurfers.

> *"…a new place… new country, new people, new language maybe, a new currency you're using, you have new food to eat, new history, new politics to learn about... many things…*

I do want to try to go new places I haven't been for the sake of going there to see what is hidden." (P09/G/DS/M)

These individuals preferred to engage with other like-minded individuals because the encounters inspired them to create their own unique, first-hand experiences across the globe. Couchsurfing acted as the ideal platform for them to expand their perspective and feed their curiosity. By meeting others in the Couchsurfing community, they benefitted from the conversations. These conversations fuelled their desires to explore and experience the world first-hand and give them perspective of differences found in the world.

"There's just some things that a book, a theory will never teach you. Sometimes you actually need to feel it. Sometimes you actually need to starve a few days… you need to see what it's like to have a power outage… In order to really empathise with those people and that's only a small little glimpse of their entire life. Even then we will never really know what it's like because we're so privileged and we've had such a comfortable lifestyle." (P10/G/DS/M)

"He spoke about his host in Iceland and the amazing time he had travelling from Iceland to Finland to St Petersburg to Mongolia… After hearing about his travel experiences of Iceland and the trans-Siberian train, I found myself being inspired once again to travel to Iceland or do the trans-Siberian rail route." (Reflections while hosting participant P14/G/DS/M)

Members were also given an opportunity to gain practical knowledge. They learnt about foreign dishes and their culture. In addition, staying with someone who spoke a foreign language ensured that they practiced or learnt that foreign language.

"A good way for me to start to speak Spanish again." (P15/G/DS/M)

Couchsurfing also provided them with an opportunity to access local knowledge and experience a local way of life in that country or city because they got to stay with locals.

"In-depth view of life of local people." (P04/G/PS/M)

"It allowed me to discover how other people lived." (P16/G/DS/M)

There was also the opportunity for hosts to gain an understanding of the guest's culture and the countries they had travelled to and experienced.

"So I have met some really fabulous people. What attracted me to it is the give-take aspect of it… you meet people you like. I've had three groups of world travellers staying with me. It's beautiful what they can tell you of the places they've been, the experiences they've had, not related to Couchsurfing… related to world travelling, related to the countries they have been to... so, you learn." (P02/H/DS/F)

Connecting to the different cultures ensured that the Couchsurfer stayed true to their explorative nature whereby they broadened their perspective of the places they visited.

"It gives me a better understanding of a better world … a tourist guide could not give you this… gives me a reason to travel." (P01/G/DS/M)

"I definitely wanted to hang out. I wanted to actually get to know you as a person... I asked a lot of questions. And I wanted to know what your perspective is on things. How you see life, just why you do the things you do. Why do you travel to these countries… the things that are important to you. I wanted to get to know you as a person and to also share my own life and my own ideas, my own thoughts that I have formulated through the

course of my life. It's why I feel like making that connection… I feel that that's something that I wanted it to do… First-hand perspective of what that country was like… break these stereotypes… we're trying to understand because we don't want to live a life of ignorance." (P10/G/DS/M)

4.4.2.8. Being inspired to accomplish more for themselves.

Inspiration was another benefit that was derived from the reciprocal exchange during Couchsurfing. Members learnt from each other. Their curiosity to travel was given fuel when they met others who had accomplished a lot as travellers themselves. This ensured that they continued to feel motivated to pursue their own passion for travelling.

"He has travelled to many countries… he posts pictures on his Couchsurfing profile from the remote and 'rogue' places (as he calls it). His journey and story is admirable, it's been truly inspirational. I do hope to get more guests like this." (Reflections while hosting participant P09/G/DS/M)

"When I looked at your profile, I saw that that you were very independent and you have travelled a tremendous amount and I said, 'Wow, like I want to be like this guy.'... As a role model, inspiration, you really are one. And so, I said, 'Wow, like maybe there's so much that I can learn from him. I'm sure we'll have really good conversations.' And after meeting, you're a really cool guy. It's true. Like I wasn't disappointed, you really are generous. You have a really good head on your shoulders and a very well-rounded individual. And for me I'm on this quest to be more and more like these kinds of people." (P10/G/DS/M)

The social nature of the Couchsurfing interactions also encouraged individuals to become more confident in social settings. An example of this was where individuals, who described themselves as an introvert, felt more confident to approach and connect with people they had never met before.

"Made it easier for me to approach new people." (P04/G/PS/M)

"More competent in how you converse with strangers." (P10/G/DS/M)

4.4.2.9. Learning more about self.

Couchsurfing interactions had not only benefitted members with new knowledge about the world around them but it also allowed them to introspect. Each interaction gave them a better understanding of themselves in various situations. There was also an opportunity to realise the values they held or aspired to have by interacting with others in the Couchsurfing community. This meant that Couchsurfers were receptive to having gained innately and having seen where their newly acquired self-knowledge had an impact on their lives.

"I gained a lot in terms of inspiration… you learn a lot in life lessons… I'm still a very young person and then I still got a lot to learn from these people [Couchsurfing hosts], they are all older than me and they've definitely got something that I can get from them… the life values that I can learn from them." (P14/G/DS/M)

4.4.2.10. Experiences that were enriching and nostalgic to Couchsurfers.

Individuals felt that their travelling experiences were being enhanced through the Couchsurfing platform. Interactions with other Couchsurfers created better experiences than they would not ordinarily have had should they have just been a 'tourist'. They wanted to immerse

themselves into the local way of life of country they visited as they appreciated the cultural differences that the local Couchsurfers presented.

> *"I went on a long trip for one year and at some point, I was not so much into seeing famous places anymore. I was staying in a place to meet the people from this place and not just see famous touristic stuff… You meet people from different cultures, and it gives you depth and understanding of your own life in your own country. By seeing the differences, you get to see how people think and you start thinking why you are not thinking like this."* (P01/G/DS/M)

> *"Couchsurfing was ratching my travel up yet another notch."* (P03/G/PS/M)

> *"I really experienced this country as a local would… less superficial."* (P10/G/DS/M)

There were those who chose to host or engage with Couchsurfing again because it created a certain feeling – more specifically, it was a feeling of nostalgia. Couchsurfers admitted that they continued to host members because they wanted to reignite past experiences and feelings from the time when he was travelling for a longer period. Experiencing this nostalgia during the interaction was enough of a return to give the person a sense that the relationship was reciprocal.

> *"Feels nice to remember that time… the times that's worth remembering… gives me positive feelings."* (P04/G/PS/M)

> *"Holding on to past experiences… I was trying to hold onto that."* (P09/G/DS/M)

Furthermore, the experiences that were created through the Couchsurfing platform were considered intrinsically *enriching*. The enrichment came after they immersed themselves in the

culture, formed unique social bonds, created memories with someone with similar interests, and to amplified the interaction by doing something different.

> *"Let's bear in mind that Couchsurfing, intrinsically is an experience, not an accommodation. The accommodation is part of the experience."* (P02/H/DS/F)

Sometimes it was also about the simpler things that made the Couchsurfing experiences better. For one individual, it was about having a sense of comfort and security upon arriving in a foreign city. Knowing that a host provided this benefit to them was important for this Couchsurfer.

> *"You're totally lost in a foreign city, you don't know where to go… it's very nice if there are people who just care about you… Someone I could ask questions to. Made it a lot easier arrive in a new country."* (P04/G/PS/M)

4.4.2.11. The fulfilment of inspiring others.

Throughout this chapter, Couchsurfers referred to sharing their own stories or telling their own accounts of a place they visited – and the benefits it had for them passing on that knowledge. This fed the purpose that their experiences were not just beneficial to themselves, but they gave back to the broader like-minded community who appreciated and used their wisdom.

> *"I don't have any little brothers. So I feel like I did see them as family, as my little brothers… some people that I want to help. I sort of want to help inspire. I got their information and I told them, 'Hey, I'll send you pictures of the places that I travel (to) when I'm back home.' It's all you know with the intent to try to help inspire people. To try to get them to realise that their reality isn't the only one. That it is perfectly possible for most people to get out of those situations and actually go to school and these kids have*

the opportunity to go to college, to go to university. But a lot of things that are stopping them… are these peer pressures, in order to start drinking to start smoking ... to drop out of school. And so I just try to go over with a very positive mindset, that it is possible. Just give it five more years and just stick it out. And you'll see this huge milestone that you made. And then after those five years, it won't look so difficult anymore because you'll already be in a university, you'll have graduated high school. You have a major that you're going to pursue. You have colleagues that made it to college too. So it's like now that you're there because your friends really influence the person you are. It's said that a person is like the average of like their five closest friends or something and I firmly, strongly believe in ... because I mean the people who are around you will help shape you... again because we're so easily influenced and we're so malleable as people." (P10/G/DS/M)

4.4.3. When the reciprocal interaction was not beneficial anymore for the Couchsurfer.

Earlier in the chapter, there were moments where the social exchange felt one-sided, or individuals needed to communicate their expectations of a reciprocal relationship. There were four (4) themes which emerged that related to outcomes of these Couchsurfing experiences.

4.4.3.1. Dysfunctional outcomes that led to misinformation in the community.

Couchsurfers were chasing positive reviews while avoiding negative reviews. They compromised on raising their concerns or discomforts during the interaction in fear of receiving an automatic negative review or coming across as disrespectful. An example was found in the

extract below. The Couchsurfer recognised that it was not proper to confront the host in their own space for fear of going against the *spirit of Couchsurfing* and being disrespectful.

> *(Researcher): "Did you ever feel like you would like to just confront him about the fact that he's doing this laundry so late and cooking so late?"*
>
> *(P17/HO/DS/M): "Not really. I don't feel it's appropriate because this is his space after all. I'm actually taking up his space and intruding his space."*

There were Couchsurfers who also moderated their behaviour during the Couchsurfing experience because they feared receiving a negative review process at the end of the experience. This created some dysfunction for the community. This dysfunction was also further exacerbated because there were individuals who felt that it was not appropriate to give someone a negative reference – regardless of how bad the experience turned out.

> *"A negative reference is a reflection on you giving the reference… Most people never complain on sharing economy platforms because both host and guest want to get positive reviews."* (P08/GH/PS/M)

> *"We didn't leave a review… it was going to be negative. That's a bit rude… we did sleep over there. But it made us feel.... yeah, very uncomfortable. It was our first Couchsurfing experience in Africa. And yeah, it didn't end up that well. We didn't feel a connection. She didn't want to talk to us in the first place. You know. She was like just watching her movies all day."* (P11/G/DS/M)

Speaking to a Couchsurfer who had been on the receiving end of having someone not write a reference for him provided some perspective around how the individual perceived the action. This individual was aware that his apartment was dirty at the time of hosting. The

outcome from the Couchsurfing experience was that this individual had not received a reference and he internalised this observed action. This Couchsurfer felt shame and invalidated from the experience.

> *"I wrote him a reference, but he didn't write back… I felt a big shame. I was more angry at me and not angry at him."* (P16/G/DS/M)

Another dysfunctional outcome of the Couchsurfing interactions was when members used the platform for something it's not designed to be. There were participants who described that there were people using Couchsurfing for dating purposes. By using the platform for ulterior motives, this dissuaded people from using the platform where they intended to connect with like-minded individuals and enhance their authentic experience as a traveller.

> *"I know there are many people who are using (Couchsurfing) as a dating site."* (P07/HO/DS/M)

> *"Younger girls get hosted more easily… there is another side to Couchsurfing… a lot are doing this for sexual intercourse."* (P15/G/DS/M)

For another Couchsurfer, they learnt about their unwarranted behaviour from their former host including it one their profile. During the interview with this Couchsurfer, he became self-conscious of his behaviour and that it was not conducive to what was expected from him during that interaction.

> *(Researcher): "So given that he mentioned that, contribute to the groceries … What did that make you think about this environment then?"*
>
> *(P16/G/DS/M): "It made me think it's a give and share but this I had understood really well. It was just the fact that first, I'm ashamed to say it but I had no*

money… And secondly, I had offered to contribute. He said, 'No.' … And when he said no, I didn't insist so much. So, during the whole week, he had paid for me."

An intriguing aspect in this interview was that unlike many other conversations around feelings associated with receiving in abundance and feeling uneasy, this individual had not reported feeling relieved after receiving in abundance.

(Researcher): "But how did that make you feel that somebody was doing that for you?"

(P16/G/DS/M): "Oh, well, I was kind of relieved … But it's not that he spent so much money. It was like he would buy bread and we would share it. It mostly came down to that… I truly offered him to pay for the half and he said, 'No.' He truly refused. But afterwards he wrote it on the chart like, 'People should contribute.'"

In addition, there was a post-rationalised response that made this respondent feel like his one-sided behaviour was justifiable. He never felt the need to give back as long as he felt that what he was doing was moderated.

"I knew I was not profiting from him… I was not rich. They have the means to do it. I knew in the bottom of my heart I liked him a lot… that I don't rip these people off… I felt good receiving in this environment." (P16/G/DS/M)

4.4.3.2. Becoming selective and prescriptive in a self-governed community.

The host became selective after receiving many requests to host or having hosted many Couchsurfers. There were hosts who found it difficult to just decline a request. Having a genuine excuse to decline the request made it easier for their conscience.

"This year, I declined a lot of requests because I have a lot of business trips for my work." (P15/G/DS/M)

Alternatively, the Couchsurfer chose individuals (whether as a host or guest) who had a like-minded interest or had travelled extensively as in the example below.

"I tend to be lazy and go for the ones who are world travellers and who have a lot of experience travelling, a lot of understanding of other cultures." (P08/GH/PS/M)

As mentioned previously, an individual mentioned that he wanted to meet people who were genuinely interested in him as a host. This Couchsurfer included a keyword in his profile and he used this as a means of determining whether the guest wanted to truly meet him as a host. Similarly, if the request had not included the keyword, it made it easier for him to decline the request. Another Couchsurfer also included a restriction in his profile in terms of the people he preferred not to host. This was done after he was not able to form an authentic connection during a former Couchsurfing experience.

"The change that happened when I wrote on my profile, I prefer to host people who are older than twenty-five… It's linked to some experiences I had… I took time to host two young girls from Israel… (their) first Couchsurfing experience… We didn't have a lot to exchange because they were just, let's say, really brand-new in adult life. And there, there was not so much to exchange. And after that, I prefer to have people, like I said, twenty-five and older but it's not a strict rule. I want to prefer to have people that have a different maturity level." (P15/G/DS/M)

4.4.3.3. Lots of effort with diminished returns.

Hosting on Couchsurfing appeared to have its limits. One respondent had stopped using Couchsurfing because it required effort. The effort of using Couchsurfing seemed to offer fewer and fewer benefits from new interactions. For this individual, he wanted to connect in a like-minded way, and it had become harder to acquire those social benefits from the environment.

"You don't really click and then you feel [that] it becomes work." (P03/G/PS/M)

"Connecting… and that's what you want from it [Couchsurfing] but to find those people... early on it was a little bit easier and then it got tougher and tougher. And then as it [Couchsurfing] expanded, you also started getting more 'No's' or a lack of response. And so, it feels like you're putting in effort with it." (P03/G/PS/M)

Excessive hosting in bigger cities meant that hosts in these cities had reached their capacity of being able to host further.

"I've done a lot of rural surfing as well as in cities, but less in big cities since there tends to be fewer hosts because most of them have kind of maxed out on the number of guests they actually want to host." (P08/GH/PS/M)

"People in big cities like Prague, Budapest or whatever, they receive so many requests. It's very hard to get hosted." (P15/G/DS/M)

4.4.3.4. Lost interest in using Couchsurfing.

There were Couchsurfers, who participated in the study and acknowledged that they were using Couchsurfing less, if at all, anymore. The platform had lost its appeal and purpose for them.

"Couchsurfing needs time… I have better knowledge of what I'm gonna do and where and when… it's a matter of flexibility." (P01/G/DS/M)

"Compromising my own family time… not having our house for the three of us." (P03/G/PS/M)

"And at some point, I didn't feel connected to them… really young community and starting to feel a bit old." (P15/G/DS/M)

Further to this, as they got older and had travelled extensively, these individuals were less willing to compromise on certain comforts just to gain a unique perspective of a local way of life.

"You realise that you're probably over emphasising the free place to stay… not that comfortable (on a couch)." (P03/G/PS/M)

"I've gotten older and more comfortable… I would never be able to do that again." (P09/G/DS/M)

For others, the disrespect from other Couchsurfers had led to a disinterest.

"I just heard about some people who stopped doing it (Couchsurfing) because they hosted people who were very unfriendly or rude and somehow ruined this experience for them." (P04/G/PS/M)

Through conversations with Couchsurfers outside of the interview process, there was mention of Couchsurfing having changed from what it used to be. To understand this further, the researcher posed this as a question during interviews with individuals who had used Couchsurfing from when it was a non-profit organisation. One Couchsurfer acknowledged that

the platform has changed over time but stated that the core functions remained. However, this change did not leave him using the platform less.

"Changing … but the core functionality is still there." (P08/GH/PS/M)

Another participant had grown less fond of Couchsurfing because these changes.

"And you could do these targeted searches… That's what you want from it (Couchsurfing) but to find those people... early on it was a little bit easier and then it got tougher and tougher. And then as it (Couchsurfing) expanded, you also started getting more 'No's' or a lack of response. And so it feels like you're putting in effort with it but also you have the rise of AirBnB…. With AirBnB, the process is much quicker. There's no kind of weird, you'll get a better service. You know, I haven't had to sleep on a couch again." (P03/G/PS/M)

This was different to those who could not host due to external circumstances out of their control.

"I couldn't host… I stayed in a security compound… makes it complicated… but now that I stay outside of the compound, I have started again." (P09/G/DS/M)

"I didn't receive a lot of requests because there were a lot of student hosts in Toulouse… a lot of people offering… Last year, I stopped doing Couchsurfing again because I had a girlfriend and (it) was incompatible with her." (P15/G/DS/M)

4.4.4. Summary.

Through the reciprocal nature of the interaction, whether expected or not, Couchsurfers benefitted from the environment in various ways. These benefits of the reciprocal relationship

when interacting with others, either as the host or the guest, from the Couchsurfing platform were social, experiential and intrinsic. Couchsurfing was less about the material objects that were being exchanged and more about trying to build the relationship by creating opportunities to engage socially. Part of the sociability of the interaction and creating the best outcomes started with *bringing yourself*. This meant conversing about each other's interests in order to find common ground. It was important for the individual to showcase that they were interested in socialising with the community in order to benefit socially.

When Couchsurfers felt that the interaction with their counterpart became disrespectful and one-sided, they had not always communicated their disappointments or expectations to them. They were afraid of calling out the inappropriate behaviour in fear of receiving a negative reference or they chose not to give a negative reference in the event that it reflected badly on them within the Couchsurfing community. For those who continued to use Couchsurfing, they became more selective on who they hosted or stayed with. Eventually, the effort to remain active on Couchsurfing began to outweigh the benefits (i.e. social, experiential or intrinsic) that was available to them as host or guest. As a result, the participation of these individuals on the Couchsurfing surfing platform dissipated.

5. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the behaviour of individuals interacting through Couchsurfing, a non-monetary sharing economy. This was in view of finding relevance for social exchange theory in the context of interactions as they occur in Couchsurfing. Four key research questions were born out of ascertaining a better understanding of the social context in a non-monetary setting in view of social exchange theory. These research questions were centred around firstly *understanding the social nature of the interaction in Couchsurfing by clarifying the reciprocal dynamics*; secondly, *exploring measures that Couchsurfers used to ensure that the interaction was reciprocal*; thirdly, *exploring the impact of altruism on the social nature of the Couchsurfing interaction* and fourthly, *understanding how both individuals in the exchange maximised their benefits.*

This chapter presents an overview of the research findings that *clarifies the reciprocal nature of the interaction in Couchsurfing*. Reciprocity in Couchsurfing was so much more than a simple, once-off give-and-take exchange (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Molm, 1990, 2010; Molm et al., 2007). It was the continuity of the reciprocal exchange between Couchsurfers that resulted in a co-created, collaborative experience.

Couchsurfers also had expectations of a reciprocal exchange. At some point during the Couchsurfing interaction, the provider in the relationship resorted to *determining if the reciprocal exchange was adequate* from their exchange partner. The provider considered the collective co-created reciprocal experience and not just a specific reciprocal response. It was how these expectations were managed in the Couchsurfing environment that ensured whether the reciprocal exchange continued into future.

By ensuring that these expectations remained addressed, both the host and the guest benefitted and *maximised their benefits* during the co-created Couchsurfing experience. The social benefits were noted as more rewarding to the exchange partners because it ensured the continuity of interacting beyond the confines of Couchsurfing. However, it was not always possible to maintain the prospect of maximising these benefits. Couchsurfers eventually reached a point where their contributions to the Couchsurfing community outweighed the benefits of each new exchange (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958).

Lastly, the *implications for social exchange theory* are discussed in this chapter. The social nature of the interaction in the context of Couchsurfing involved a more intricate, continuous reciprocal dynamic. The non-monetary, social environment further offered perspective to the theory because people brought their own unspoken, pre-existing assumptions into the setting while they were treading carefully to ensure they fulfilled on the needs and expectations of their Couchsurfing counterpart. The identification of generosity during the exchange has proposed that with further investigation, the theoretical framework has an opportunity to remain at forefront of explaining social dynamics in the sharing economy.

5.1. Clarifying the Reciprocal Nature of the Interaction in Couchsurfing

The research findings revealed that the interaction within Couchsurfing was reciprocal in nature. This supports the findings by Geiger et al. (2018) where there was also a mutual reciprocal exchange between hosts and guests in Couchsurfing. Couchsurfing interactions involved giving back based on the provision(s) received. This basis of reciprocation fits with the earliest tenets of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). In addition, reciprocation, within the context of Couchsurfing, was better aligned to the ongoing contributions towards social exchange theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Molm, 1990; Molm et

al., 2007; Molm, 2010). The alignment of this study to some of the ongoing contributions to the theory have been articulated below.

First, the reciprocal exchange in Couchsurfing was less about returning a general favour, like being hosted in return (Cropanzano et al., 2017). The reciprocal response during the social interaction did not need to resemble the provision provided. Couchsurfing hosts would have provided a bed and even collected their guest upon arrival, while the guest reciprocated by making a sangria that afternoon or packing away the dishes after supper.

Second, there was no specific time frame between what was provided and what was given in return (Molm, 2010; Neo, Yu, Weber & Gonzalez, 2013). There were some who would take a few days before they reciprocated. There were guests who delayed their reciprocal response, such as inviting their host out to visit a local spot for drinks or preparing a meal a few days into the Couchsurfing stay. In these situations, there was often additional provisions made before any reciprocal gesture was returned. This delay implied that a single reciprocal action counted for several provisions during the Couchsurfing experience (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

Sometimes, the reciprocal response was more immediate. The guest would reciprocate upon meeting their host by giving them a gift. Some of the Couchsurfers disagreed that bringing along a gift was reciprocal. These individuals saw the act of gift-giving as customary (Belk, 2010; 2014a). For others, the gift signified respect and cemented the acknowledgement of what was being offered – a place to stay. This gift enhanced the trustworthiness of the guest in the relationship because they were able to show the host that they had intentions of being respectful by giving back (Molm et al, 2007).

Third, reciprocity in Couchsurfing was not only about the exchange of tangible objects such as providing a place to stay in exchange for preparing a meal, helping around the house with chores, or buying drinks for the host at a restaurant (Aruan & Felicia, 2019; Harvey et al., 2014; Palgan et al., 2017). While Couchsurfers did reciprocate in that way, they also reciprocated by showing appreciation and gratitude; they provided companionship by being present and showing interest in each other's travel stories and cultures; and they enhanced the social bond by doing an activity together in the host's city of residence (e.g. going to a restaurant in the local township that neither had been to).

The essence of these reciprocal responses by Couchsurfers indicated that the interaction was more about the social exchange than it was about the exchange of tangible resources (Emerson, 1976; Molm, 2010). Even these tangible resources, such as the preparation of a meal, were ways for these individuals to spend time together and reveal something about their culture. These ways of reciprocating were in line with the social aspects related to reciprocity according to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Molm et al., 2007). Similarly, the gestures of wanting to give back (e.g. they offered to contribute towards grocery expenses) were sometimes enough to indicate a form of reciprocation (Molm et al., 2007).

Fourth, this study revealed that the provider in the relationship needed to experience something in return from their direct exchange partner. This was evident when hosts explained that they felt disrespected because their guest was not reciprocating enough. For example, the guest did not bring a gift upon their arrival and they negated on an arrangement to spend time together where the host could teach the guest how to prepare a local meal. Similarly, there were guests who bought their hosts drinks at a bar and were left disappointed when their offer was not

returned. This suggested that a direct reciprocal exchange between host and guest was not optional like it had been suggested in the literature (Molm, 2010).

Fifth, the reciprocal exchange was about co-creating the Couchsurfing experience. This co-created experience involved many moments where provisions and reciprocity flowed between host and guest. This implied that reciprocation involved taking the full Couchsurfing experience of reciprocal exchanges into account and not just the sub-parts of the interaction during that experience (Molm, 2010). The continuity of reciprocal exchange begun from the moment the request stage was sent and continued throughout their time spent together as Couchsurfing host and guest. There was an active reciprocal role that both host and guest needed to fulfil during the Couchsurfing interaction.

5.2. The Couchsurfing Interaction Embedded a Continuous Reciprocal Exchange

Couchsurfing hosts were hospitable from the beginning of the interaction. They provided a homely experience for their guest. Their guests showed their gratitude by give back intermittently during the Couchsurfing interaction. Guests reciprocated in many ways, such as spending the first night getting to know their host in conversation, offering a gift from their hometown, giving them tips about another travel destination, preparing an exotic meal for the host, or buying their host a beer at a local drinking spot. Sometimes, the roles of provider and reciprocator were switched. The guest would become the provider in the relationship when they bought the host family groceries and in exchange the host family prepared them a meal or did their washing.

These co-created Couchsurfing experiences became more meaningful when these individuals recognised their like-mindedness through the continuity of the reciprocal exchange.

By spending time together in conversation and asking each other questions, the reciprocal conversation led to both individuals discovering their common interests and common purposes. The active interest in finding out whether these commonalities existed offered these individuals a sense of belonging in return and they felt less lonely during each stay. Furthermore, unravelling this like-mindedness prompted them to consider doing other activities together.

The reciprocal exchange was enhanced when host and guest spent time together and created a shared experience, such as organising a trip together to the national park or walking together on beach or going to a party in the town. These shared experiences were reciprocal because it offered the host and the guest companionship during the experience. Even the nostalgic feeling from recalling the experience years later felt that they got something back from the interaction. These findings suggested that the hedonic experiences offered Couchsurfers more benefit than was formerly mentioned in the literature (e.g. Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Hamari et al., 2016; Lawson et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2019; Schaffner et al., 2017). The presence of each in the situation and the emotions associated to the co-created experiences were reciprocal for both individuals and helped to entrench a stronger social bond. These bonds were key in providing further opportunities to continue the exchange after the Couchsurfing interaction. These individuals felt closer and friendships were formed (Parigi et al., 2013; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020).

In summary, the practicality of these co-created experiences and continuity of the reciprocal relationship suggested that a reciprocal response did not always need to follow a specific favour (Belk, 2014a; Harvey et al., 2014; Habibi et al., 2016; Sahlins, 1972) nor did it define it to a specific instance of giving back (Blau, 1964; Blau, 1986; Ekeh, 1974; Homans, 1958). Reciprocity in Couchsurfing could not be defined to one moment. Rather, the co-created

experience where the relationships remained reciprocal has captured what collaborating has involved (Belk, 2010; Belk 2014b; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Fraanje & Spaagaren, 2019; Habibi et al., 2016).

The collaboration by both the host and the guest ensured that the reciprocal chain remained flowing. Eventually, this accumulation of give-and-take actions throughout a Couchsurfing interaction contributed to both their continued participation within the Couchsurfing community as well as between each other after the Couchsurfing interaction. In order for the reciprocal exchange to get to a state of continuity beyond the Couchsurfing interaction, both host and guest reflected on the sufficiency of the reciprocal response.

5.3. The Continuous Reciprocal Exchange Led towards a Measure of Adequacy

During these collaborative reciprocal experiences, there came a point where Couchsurfers deliberated on the adequacy of what was provided and what was given in return (Redmond, 2015). Reciprocity was not about equalising the exchange because no one was keeping a mental ledger of trying to balance out the provisions versus the returns. The culmination of reciprocation in Couchsurfing was a feeling of either having provided enough or having given back enough (Blau, 1964; Molm, 2010). For many, they felt that either they could not give back enough based on what they received, or they felt that they were being used during the interaction. These feelings suggested that there was an imbalance during the Couchsurfing interaction between what was provided and what was gained. The research revealed that there were three factors that contributed to this imbalance.

First, the subjective experience of the reciprocal relationship differed between host and guest. The ascribed perceived value of what was provided and what was given back were never

the same (Blau, 1964; Molm, 2010). Even through observing the interaction, the tangible reciprocal response was not always in the same physical form in comparison to what was previously provided. For example, in a typical scenario, a Couchsurfing host provided a couch to sleep on, prepared a few meals for the guest, and went on outings with the guest. The guest reciprocated by being curious during conversations and helping around the house with some chores – and sometimes they paid for one of the meals when they went out.

The subjectivity of the reciprocal experience was dependent on the feelings of each in the relationship. Couchsurfers struggled to articulate why the Couchsurfing experience was beneficial to them. As an example, an individual described their feelings by saying, *"Just good vibes."* (P15/G/DS/M). These feelings related to a fulfilment that the provider felt during a general Couchsurfing interaction because there were indications of reciprocation. Building onto this, the interpretation of how Couchsurfers spoke about these intrinsic feelings revealed something further. Couchsurfers also felt fulfilled because they were giving back based former Couchsurfing interactions where they had benefitted in the past. This was not the first study to reveal that providing in the relationship could be enriching, fulfilling or inspiring during a reciprocal exchange (Ma et al., 2019). This was an important finding because it suggested that the act of giving back to someone else in the community did have an immediate reciprocal benefit for the provider. The feeling of fulfilling on a former gain was rewarding in itself.

In instances where the host felt that these gestures of reciprocity were adequate, there were guests who felt like they could still do more. Having an imbalance like this between what the provider thought was sufficient and what the receiver thought was insufficient was important for the continuity of the interaction in Couchsurfing. This meant that some Couchsurfers wanted to continue the relationship with the host after the exchange. In contrast, when the host felt that

the reciprocal responses were not adequate, the host concluded that the co-created Couchsurfing experience was less than favourable. The host often in these circumstances would articulate their expectations of an adequate exchange on their Couchsurfing profile. These overtly stated expectations affected the willingness by some to consider these individuals as hosts – as one put it: *"And those hosts who inform you in advance of a lengthy, lengthy list of rules, in my view, are to be avoided… It seems like it's just too much effort."* (P08/GH/PS/M).

Second, there was a delay between the provisions and when the reciprocal responses emerged. The delay was not only based on the time it took the receiving party decided to reciprocate. There was constant provision as a result of the hospitality shown by the host – leaving little opportunity for guests to reciprocate in those moments. The delay in the reciprocal response meant that more was provided upfront before anything was reciprocated (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Neo et al., 2013).

The constant provision upfront was fuelled by a presumption that the guest knew that they had to reciprocate in the relationship. Previous research around measuring the impact of delays in reciprocity had shown that the delay in giving back would be tolerated for as long as there were pre-existing conditions in the environment, such as trust (Molm et al., 2007; Fokker et al., 2008; Neo et al., 2013). When the provider, in this study, felt that the delay was too long, this resulted in them either voicing their expectations to their counterpart during the exchange or they waited until the end of the Couchsurfing interaction to re-evaluate the adequacy of the exchange. Waiting until the end of the interaction either resulted in some form of reciprocal response presenting itself or the provider chose not to give a reference to the guest.

Third, there was a tendency to give generously during the interaction. Generosity in Couchsurfing was not as a result of the individuals not getting time to give back, but it was rather

about it being hospitable. The generosity by the provider in the relationship was about taking care of the other person (Lashley, 2013; Lynch et al., 2011). There were also cultural nuances around hospitality and why individuals showed up being generous during the interaction (Coulson et al., 2014; Lashley, 2017). Within the context of Couchsurfing, it was usually the host, who in being hospitable, gave generously during the relationship. Besides providing a place to stay, they also sometimes fulfilled a role as tour guide to the city. Other hosts would constantly prepare meals for their guests or offer to do their laundry. In some instances, the hosts also drove their guests to other parts of the country and even paid for their entrance fees to places. A Couchsurfer mentioned that sometimes the host and the guest had tried to out-give each other.

The generosity and hospitality provided in Couchsurfing was easy to confuse with altruism (Belk, 2010; Lashley, 2013; Lynch et al., 2011). Looking at the entire Couchsurfing experience, this generosity was put into perspective. The culmination of the Couchsurfing experience being reciprocal entailed that hosts did get something in return for their generosity and altruism as a concept remained elusive. However, the context of a generous host could be construed that the host was not trying to maximise their rewards during the exchange and was constantly at a loss (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). It only became a perceived loss when the recipient did not reciprocate directly with the provider. Specifically, if the behaviour of the recipient was perceived to be for self-gain, then the continuous reciprocal nature of the interaction was affected. This was because that there was little perceived benefit for the provider in a relationship that felt one-sided (Homans, 1958; Kahneman, 2011). For as long as the hospitable and generous host felt like they had already received back sufficiently, the onus of giving back rested on the guest who received generously.

Couchsurfing guests felt that the generosity offered was appreciated but it made it difficult to reciprocate directly back to the host. Many times, these guests were on a shoe-string budget which limited their means to give back. By receiving generously, these individuals did what they could to give back. For example, they helped with chores and the spent time retelling their own travel stories and the offered travel tips. Although, these individuals still wanted to give back more. This perpetuated the need for these Couchsurfers, usually as guests, to find alternative ways to give back. This resulted in them giving back to others in the Couchsurfing community by becoming a host or they gave back by helping other backpacking travellers (Chou, 2015; Molm, 2010). There were also instances where some believed that they would never be able to fulfil on the generosity received but they still tried to give back to others in the community by hosting them or they still had plans to host in the future.

In essence, the subjectivity of the reciprocal experience, the delay of the reciprocal response and the generosity shown during the Couchsurfing exchange influenced the continuity of the reciprocal exchange in two ways. The reciprocal interaction either continued or it was disrupted. When it continued, the weight of wanting to continue the reciprocal exchange was felt more by the guest than it was felt by the host. This resulted in both the host and the guest continuing where it left off, or the guest continued the reciprocal exchange into a new setting with another Couchsurfer. An indirect form of reciprocity, where the guest continued the relationships with someone new, was more for the guest to carry out than it was for the host to know whether the guest gave back to others (Molm, 2010).

The continuity of the reciprocal exchange was disrupted when the host perceived their guests to be taking their hospitality for granted and not giving enough back to them. This left the host feeling disrespected and disappointed by the co-created experience. The host re-evaluated

their means of providing in the relationship and their expectations became more apparent during the stay or after the interaction. Often when the host left it to after the interaction, this was either in the form of a negative review or they included their expectations on their own Couchsurfing profile.

5.4. Managing Expectations as a Measure of Adequacy

Couchsurfers did have expectations of wanting a reciprocal relationship during their encounter. However, it was considered taboo to acknowledge that they had any expectations during their interaction. Expressing expectations explicitly had the potential to be misconstrued as wanting to gain selfishly in an environment (Chudzian, 2015; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Therefore, it was preferred if these expectations were not expressed and remained unspoken. This revealed that the interaction was more fulfilling when the receiving party reciprocated out of their own volition.

The presence of these expectations, whether spoken or unspoken, further refuted the idea that altruism existed in Couchsurfing (Belk, 2010, 2014a). Even when Couchsurfers thought that they were being altruistic, they still had expectations of getting something in return (Sahlins, 1972). These expectations revealed themselves when the provider in the relationship felt that the other individual was not forthcoming enough or when they felt that the Couchsurfing experience could have been enhanced by a reciprocated action.

The non-verbalisation of expectations was not new to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). The reciprocal exchange was more natural when these expectations were not communicated. Maintaining a voluntary reciprocal interaction, a better social bond developed between host and guest (Blau, 1986; Fokker et al., 2008; Molm et al., 2007). Eventually, the

continuity of voluntary reciprocation ensured that their like-mindedness became apparent and eventually led some to remain in contact after the Couchsurfing interaction. These individuals remained friends, even if some of the friendships eventually faded over time. Therefore, to sustain the continuous reciprocal exchange, it was better to not communicate expectations and rather allow proceedings to continue naturally.

The co-created experience did not always work out for Couchsurfers. There were guests who failed to give enough back directly. For example, a guest stayed longer than intending with the host, used up their resources and other people who contributed to the Couchsurfing experience, and only gestured to give back – but in the end, never gave back. As a result, there were those who verbalised their expectations around wanting a reciprocal relationship.

There were various ways in which Couchsurfers made others aware of the necessity to recipriocate. Couchsurfers recalled being told about this necessity for reciprocity upon joining the community because it was part of the ethos (or as termed by the community, the *spirit of Couchsurfing*). For others, they expressed their expectations of a requiring a reciprocal exchange on their Couchsurfing profiles or when they provided a review for a guest. Perceived non-reciprocity was not always addressed directly with the person not giving back enough in the relationship. The result of the provider not addressing their expectations of a reciprocal interaction directly with the non-reciprocator left these individuals confused or defensive at first. Eventually they felt ashamed of their behaviour. These Couchsurfers who received the negative feedback attempted to correct the behaviour in subsequent experiences.

There were instances where Couchsurfers either had left a positive reference or they had not left a reference for the individual perceived to have not reciprocated. Some individuals held off by not writing a negative reference after the experience for concern that they had to admit to

themselves that they had expectations. The impact of acknowledging this in the Couchsurfing community would affect their self-image. Protecting their image in the community was more important than calling out others who were not fulfilling on the *spirit of Couchsurfing* (Thye, 2000; Thye, Willer & Markovsky, 2006).

As a result of these individuals not addressing the unappreciated behaviour directly, there was no recourse for the perceived non-reciprocating behaviour. The impact of misrepresenting their expectations or keeping their expectations unspoken after the Couchsurfing experience resulted in a dysfunctional reciprocal ecosystem. There was nothing warning other Couchsurfers of those guilty of non-reciprocity and how they fell short of someone else's expectations.

There were Couchsurfers who included more prescriptive guidelines in their online profile around the sort of Couchsurfing experiences they sought out. These individuals set expectations when previously the interaction was reliant on a psychological contract to voluntarily reciprocate (Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008; Rousseau, 1989). By expressing these expectations, it had the potential to disrupt the voluntary, self-regulatory dynamic of reciprocity that was supposed to exist between the host and the guest (Blau, 1964, 1986). These stated expectations went against the inherent values systems of self-governance (i.e. *the spirit of Couchsurfing*). It was not apparent in the research whether reciprocating thereafter felt forced. If anything, there was a sense that Couchsurfers were more cautious around engaging with those who had expectations overtly stated in their profiles.

In situations where Couchsurfers were called out indirectly for their inability to fulfil on the reciprocal nature of the *spirit of Couchsurfing*, they became more conscious of their efforts in subsequent Couchsurfing engagements. Similarly, where someone fell short of another Couchsurfer's expectations, the responsibility was on the next host to be selective and reject

requests without repercussions (Fokker et al., 2008; Cropanzano et al., 2017). This suggested that the continuity of the reciprocal exchange with others in the community was at risk of being disrupted (Molm et al., 2007).

Even though there was benefit in keeping expectations unspoken because it had potential to form better friendships (Blau, 1986), Couchsurfers have offered insight into the practicality of keeping expectations muted. There was sometimes more benefit for the community-at-large when expectations were verbalised – even if it was not stated directly to the perpetrator. Managing these expectations had the potential to disrupt the continuity of a general host and be hosted way of reciprocating. However, these managed expectations helped sift out those who had not fitted within the community of like-minded individuals.

5.5. Maximising the Benefits through the Co-created Reciprocal Exchange

Individuals were not using the Couchsurfing platform solely to save money by getting a free bed. Both sides of the reciprocal exchange needed to give something of themselves (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). They contributed their living space (e.g. the guests had access to the kitchen to prepare a meal, or they were given a couch or a bed to sleep on), their time (e.g. the guest stayed awake to get to know his host even though he was tired, or the guest chose to stay at home with the host as opposed to the guest attending another friend's party in the town), and their resources (e.g. contributing to pay for the groceries, access to internet, or access to the washing machine). Sometimes the monetary expenditure they incurred while reciprocating was more than what they would have paid had they stayed at a hotel, a hostel, or a bed and breakfast.

They contributed their time and resources because they understood that Couchsurfing was about a give-and-take relationship. They knew that they had to give something up to receive something in return. It was the only way that they could access the benefits that were unique to Couchsurfing. They could not benefit in the same way anywhere else and that is what kept them interested in the Couchsurfing experience. Furthermore, Couchsurfers were not intentionally going out of their way to hurt one another in order to benefit. They wanted a co-created experience where it was mutually beneficial for both host and guest (Cook & Yamagishi, 1992; Molm 2010). For as long as the interaction remained continuously reciprocal, both Couchsurfers in the interaction benefitted from the relationship. Eventually, these contributions that they made were offset by what they gained back from the accumulated reciprocal experience.

This study provided a more nuanced overview of the sorts of gains that were evident from the continuous reciprocal interactions. There were three broad themes of gains that emerged from the research. These included social benefits, hedonic benefits, and intrinsic benefits.

Each Couchsurfing experience was spent getting to know someone new (Grybaitė & Stankevičienė, 2016; Guttentag et al., 2018; Hellwig et al., 2014). Both individuals became briefly acquainted by the biographical information available from the online profile and the content of the messaging that took place prior to meeting up. They became more acquainted once they met in person. Couchsurfing hosts wanted to know more about their guests and Couchsurfing guests wanted to know more about their hosts. They got to know each other better as they spent time engaging in conversation and asking each other questions.

The time spent together ensured that these individuals continued to discuss common interests. The continuous curiosity and search for similarities meant that there were many social benefits that came to the fore. The benefit of identifying these commonalities was that these

individuals felt less alone during their travels and they knew more people like them. The presence of someone with like-minded ideas, even if it was temporary and for a short time, gave them a sense of belonging (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018; Möhlmann, 2015).

By getting to know each other better through the reciprocated conversations, this led to these individuals bonding further through a shared experience outside of their home. These shared experiences, as previously discussed, were more meaningful when both the host and the guest either engaged in an activity together, such as attending a salsa class with the host, or when they got to meet their host's friends at a party or at a quiz evening. These shared experiences were the defining moments where they became friends (Blau, 1986; Dos Santos et al., 2017; Fokker et al., 2008; Molm et al., 2007). These friendships were important for hosts because it gave them an opportunity to meet up again in a different location around the world and continue where they left off. It was also beneficial to the host because they could call on these individuals in the future should they or their children ever want to visit the place where the guest came from.

The co-created experiences were instrumental to Couchsurfing guests because they enhanced their travels. These were experiences that they would not have had should they have used a different form of accommodation, like AirBnB or a hotel (Geiger et al., 2018). These individuals felt more validated as a traveller having had a local experience. These local experiences signified that they got to live like a local and not just a tourist visiting the place. As a host, these co-created experiences were beneficial only if they got to do something that they hadn't done before in this hometown.

The host also gained intrinsically from the social reciprocal nature of the Couchsurfing experience (Ma et al., 2019; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). Couchsurfing was enriching for

the individuals because they gained perspective and knowledge of how others lived their lives abroad. This resulted in them introspecting more and they recognised areas in their lives that they could still improve. These hosts were inspired to become better people, where previously they might have lacked purpose and motivation to do pursue a career or a visit a travel destination. These intrinsic benefits where the motivation and the inspiration were rewarding suggested again that there were no selfless acts in Couchsurfing – even if they gave generously or denied having expectations.

The closest intrinsic benefit that came to an altruistic expression was the fulfilment that the host experienced by just giving (Chou, 2015; Ma et al., 2019). As indicated earlier in this chapter, these feelings were as a result of them fulfilling on a former gain (Molm, 2010). These individuals acted on their own need to give back to others in the community after years of benefitting in the same way previously. It is this finding that further questioned whether any form of sharing as described by Belk (2010; 2014a) could be altruistic and without a reciprocal experience.

The last intrinsic benefit that Couchsurfers gained from the experience was the self-worth they felt from the interaction. The presence of a guest with certain status in the community, such as a high number of references, their job title, or whether they happened to be a Couchsurfing ambassador, was enough of a reciprocal response to benefit the host. This gave the host credibility when a guest with high perceived status gave them a reference in return (Geiger et al., 2018). These individuals used these connections or Couchsurfing experiences as validation of being entrenched in the community. These findings would not be new to social exchange theory. Status does skew the power dynamic in favour of benefitting even more from the reciprocal exchange (Thye, 2000; Thye et al., 2006).

These identified benefits that Couchsurfers experienced were also comparable to some of the social benefits, hedonic benefits and intrinsic benefits mentioned in the literature review. A summary of these benefits and the associated literature has been summarised in Table 5.1 (p.199).

Table 5.1

Comparison between the positive outcomes of the continuous reciprocal interactions from Couchsurfing and previously identified social benefits available from the literature relating to the sharing economy

	The benefits of a continuous reciprocal interactions from Couchsurfing as identified in this study	Previously identified benefits available from the literature relating to the sharing economy
Social	Sense of belonging through like-minded connections	A sense of belonging that these individuals feel by being part of a community (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Decrop et al., 2018; Möhlmann, 2015; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018)
	Momentary connections that alleviated loneliness	A sense of belonging that these individuals feel by being part of a community (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Decrop et al., 2018; Möhlmann, 2015; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018) Meeting new people (Hellwig et al., 2014; Grybaitė & Stankevičienė, 2016; Guttentag et al., 2018)
	Meaningful connections that led to long-term friendships being formed	Strong social ties in the form of friendships or strong cross-cultural brotherhood that emerged from these interactions (Decrop et al., 2018; Dos Santos et al., 2017; Geiger et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Palgan et al., 2017; Parigi et al., 2013; Parigi & State, 2014; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020)
Hedonic	Experiences that were enriching and nostalgic to Couchsurfers	Hedonic experiences or hedonic value (Barnes & Mattsson, 2017; Botsman & Capelin, 2016; Hamari et al., 2016; Lawson et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2019; Schaffner et al., 2017)
Intrinsic	Feeling a sense of worth in the community	The enjoyment from being able to help someone out (Ma et al., 2019; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020) Emancipation through self-expression (Kozinets, 2002)
	Gaining knowledge that broadened their perspective	Gaining knowledge and perspective by learning from each other (Geiger et al., 2018; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020)
	Being inspired to accomplish more for themselves	*Unidentified*
	Learning more about self	*Unidentified*

The fulfilment of inspiring others	The enjoyment from being able to help someone out (Ma et al., 2019; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020)

5.6. When the Prospect of Rewards were Outweighed by the Effort

Couchsurfers did reach an end of their journey on the platform after several years of engaging with others in the Couchsurfing community. These individuals eventually lost interest in using the platform. They were tired of compromising on their comfort and they wanted to have more certainty of reciprocation during the interaction. A few negative experiences had led these individuals to feel like the effort of being hospitable was not worth the gains anymore. The respect for boundaries diminished as guests used resources without permission and damaged these resources. Guests who were not forthcoming made the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals less promising that future exchanges would have been different. Couchsurfers recalled having guests who spent the duration of their stay in their rooms as opposed to communicating with the host.

The more that Couchsurfers were not getting back enough from each exchange, the more these experiences lacked differentiation from the monetised accommodation platforms, such as AirBnB (Wang & Nicolau, 2017; Sung et al., 2018; Zalega, 2018). This comparison was made because Couchsurfers felt that without any social benefit, they were only offering a place to stay with nothing in return for it. There would at least have been a monetary benefit for them had they charged for their accommodation (Frenken & Schor, 2017; Schor, 2017). The hosting experience of asking for money in exchange for their accommodation would have been the same because the sociability of that experience would also be amiss. If these individuals wanted a monetised

exchange, they would have selected that form of accommodation. Couchsurfing was really about its social exchange and both benefitting from the exchange.

These individuals also came to realise that these social connections and friendships began to fade over time (Parigi & State, 2014). Couchsurfing seemed to have been that enabler in the beginning to meet locals and form friendships. However, keeping these friendships active and ongoing was reliant on them finding alternative ways to connect and continue the reciprocal exchange. There were also only so many social bonds and friendships that an individual could endure before they lost interest.

After they lost interest in Couchsurfing, they found that using paid accommodation platforms, such as AirBnB, were a better alternative (Geiger et al., 2018). The paid accommodation entailed that there were no expectations to be fulfilled except for a payment for the services at the end. This indicated that the costs of certainty from a commercialised relationship was more beneficial that the uncertainty of the social reciprocal exchange.

5.7. A Framework to Illustrate the Reciprocal Dynamics within Couchsurfing

A summation of the reciprocal dynamics in Couchsurfing has been illustrated in the form of a conceptual framework (see Figure 5.2, p.203). This conceptual framework showcases that a Couchsurfing interaction could have resulted in a perceived imbalance between what was provided and what was given in return during the interaction. The research revealed that depending on subjective interpretation of the value associated to the provision or reciprocal response, it could be interpreted that one of the individuals perceived an imbalance in the exchange. Examples of this perceived imbalance included when someone had felt that provisions were given and they needed to be reciprocated upon, or the inadequacy that a traveller on a tight

budget felt when they could only offer their time and company in return to the host (especially when those hosts became generous), or the lack of respect that a host felt when the guest had not contributed towards the shared household expenses. This perceived imbalance either kept the reciprocal exchange ongoing or it disrupted the continuity of the exchange. A diagram in Figure 5.1 has also been used to illustrate the basis of the nature of the interaction as outlined in the research finding presented.

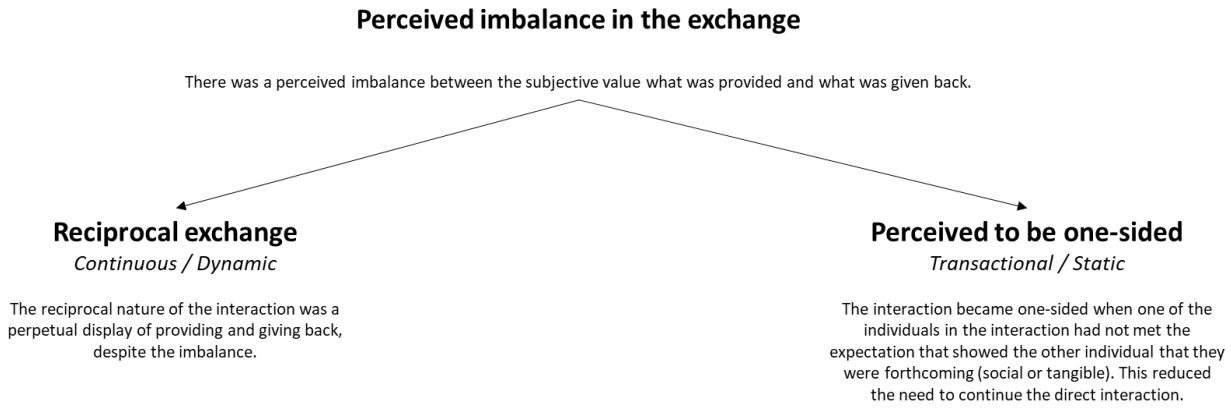


Figure 5.1: Summary of the basis of the social nature of the interaction as it played out in Couchsurfing.

The perceived imbalance where interactions were experienced as reciprocal have been indicated as a healthy imbalance in Figure 5.2. In this scenario, there was greater emphasis on continuously contributing to the environment (Cropanzano et al., 2017). The healthy imbalance was also aligned to what others have termed as collaborating (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Richardson, 2015; Balaram, 2016; Schor, 2016). During the reciprocal interaction, Couchsurfers recognised their gains, and they respond to that gain by giving back. By reciprocating, the initial provider in the relationship, felt that they gained from the returned gestures by the guest – and thus gave back as well. Thereby, perpetuating a continuous reciprocal exchange.

The perceived imbalance where interactions were experienced as one-sided have been indicated as an unhealthy imbalance in Figure 5.2. These imbalances were unhealthy because it disrupted the continuity of the reciprocal exchange. These individuals were perceived to have mostly gained in the relationship without giving back adequately. Their behaviour was also perceived to be about using the Couchsurfing community for selfish gains (Belk, 2014a). This unhealthy imbalance could also be when certain individuals were maximising the benefits from the exchange and it became abusive or more evident to their exchange partner (Blau, 1964; Molm, 2010). These sorts of interactions were likened to a transactional exchange that they could have had through a monetised accommodation platform (Frenken & Schor, 2017; Schor, 2016; Schor, 2017; Sung et al., 2018; Wang & Nicolau, 2017; Zalega, 2018).

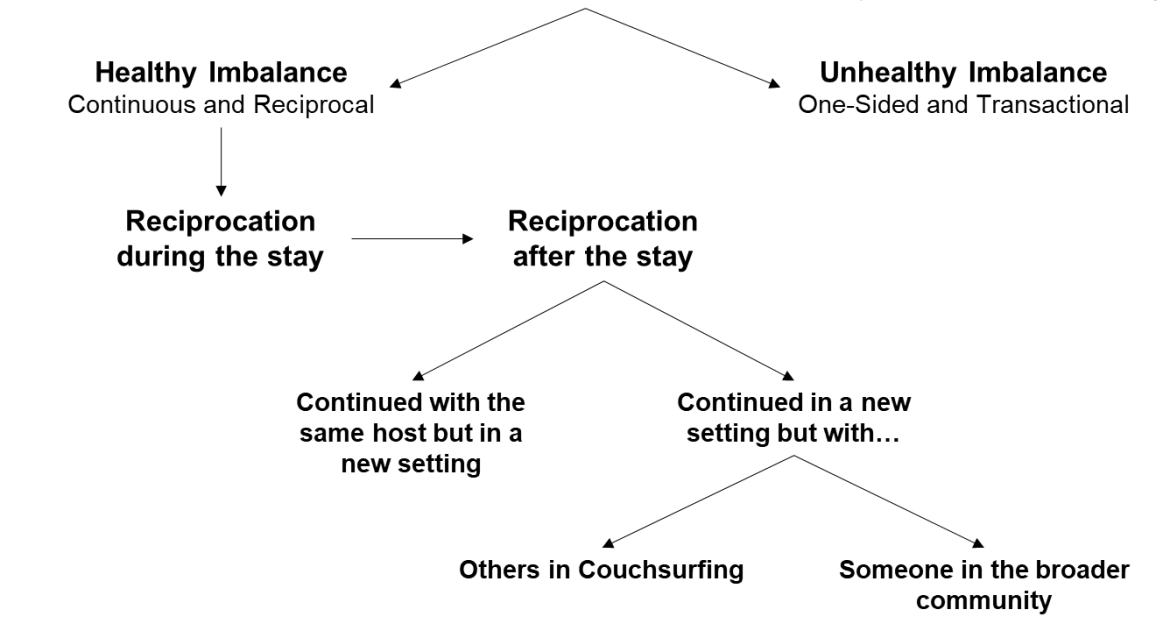


Figure 5.2: Summary of a framework that aims to depict the social nature of the reciprocal interaction and transactional exchange as it played out in Couchsurfing.

Figure 5.2 introduces various sub-components of the *healthy imbalance* in the interaction. The first sub-component of the healthy imbalance was the distinction between reciprocating during the stay and continuing to reciprocate after the stay. *Reciprocation during the stay* related to the interaction between host and guest for the duration of their stay or meet-up. The continuation of *reciprocation after the stay* meant that the guest continued to give back to their host even after the stay or the guest gave back in a new set-up.

The guest did not have a choice of giving back either during the stay or after the stay. A *healthy imbalance* implied that the guest still had to show that they were contributing during their stay. This differed from Molm (2010) where it was described that the receiving party could reciprocate to a third party and not directly back to the original provider. The concept of an indirect exchange stood when the host felt satisfied by the direct exchange and the guest reciprocated as a host to others in the community because they still wanted to give back further.

It was imperative that they still experienced reciprocal acts when they interacted with others in the same setting. Therefore, a reciprocal response during the stay was necessary in forming a relationship between interacting parties (Fokker, de Ridder, Westendorp & Pouwelse, 2008; Molm et al., 2007). Giving back during the stay was confirmation to the host that they understood the importance of the social bond that needed to form.

Reciprocation after the stay happened in two ways. There was sometimes an opportunity for the guest to play host to their former host (namely reciprocation *continued with same host but in a new setting*) or there was an opportunity to extend the hospitality they received to someone else in the Couchsurfing community or the broader community (namely reciprocation *continued in a new setting with* someone else). It is worth noting that even though individuals gave back to a broader community, they were doing so in a way that was convenient to them at that point in

time – because they were not able to host on Couchsurfing yet. However, they still hoped to eventually fulfil on giving back directly to the Couchsurfing community as a host.

These experiences of reciprocation after the stay had not implied that reciprocity was absent in the first Couchsurfing experience. Those interactions where reciprocating was continued into another setting was because individuals in the original interaction still felt that they could give back more. The reciprocal interaction that continued with the same person after the Couchsurfing experience continued to build the relationship (Geiger et al., 2018; Neo et al., 2013). This gave an opportunity for the exchange to continue from where they left off.

There was alignment between this framework (see Figure 5.2, p.203) to clarify reciprocation within Couchsurfing and the *Structure of Reciprocity in Three Forms of Exchange* (Molm, 2010). Both recognised that the reciprocal exchange can happen either directly with the original provider or indirectly with someone else in the ecosystem. The difference between what Molm (2010) showcased and reciprocity in Couchsurfing was that in this study, there had to be a reciprocal response from the recipient (usually the guest) back to the original provider (usually the host). The option of not giving back to original provider and rather choosing to give it back to someone else in the community would only be permissible if it related to hosting in return. Outside of that, there was an expectation of a social, hedonic or intrinsic benefit that had to be present.

5.8. Theoretical Implications

The research study contributed to social exchange theory in three ways. The first contribution is that the research findings affirmed and supported many of the tenets of reciprocity as it has been explained by social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958).

This study supported the theory in explaining that the reciprocal relationship relied on subjective interpretation (Blau, 1964), it was not about equalising the exchange but ensuring that everyone benefitted (Cook & Emerson, 1978), and Couchsurfers wanted to get something out from the direct exchange (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958).

The subjective experience and the expectations of benefitting were fundamental to Couchsurfing because the environment has been reliant on social connections forming to sustain itself (Blau, 1964). The possible reason some Couchsurfers also did not perceive that there was a necessity to get something in return was because there were many ways that an individual could express an act of reciprocation. Even the act of showing interest and remaining curious in the conversation was a form of reciprocation (Molm et al., 2007). These social acts, which could be viewed as conversational, are part of how hosts also got something from the exchange, such as companionship and a sense of belonging.

The more opportunities where the host and guest spent time together, the more they were able to continue fulfilling on the reciprocal exchange (Cook & Rice, 2013). Couchsurfing relationships became stronger as the reciprocal exchange continued and remained voluntary (Blau, 1964; Cook & Rice, 2013). The more natural the experience, especially when the host and guest participated together in a unique experience outside of the home, the more likely that a friendship was formed at the end of the Couchsurfing interaction. This gave opportunity to continue reciprocating in other ways after their initial stay (Molm, 2010).

The second contribution to social exchange theory was that the research findings clarified and broadened the understanding of what formed a general feeling of reciprocation (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Early contributions to the theory had been limited to a specific provision and specific return for that provision during the exchange dynamics (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976;

Homans, 1958). Until recently, there has been growing evidence that the reciprocal relationship is broader than someone gives one thing, and the favour is returned (Cropanzano et al., 2017). As seen in this study, the continuous nature of the reciprocal exchange reiterated that individuals in a community, where there was a common unspoken understanding of what was required in the environment, tended to allow a flow of provisions before any contribution was made in an effort to give back.

The difference between earlier theoretical contributions and this nuanced interpretation is that Couchsurfers had expectations of getting something back after a racking up of hospitable actions, such as when they offered a place to stay, took their guest on an excursion around town, and prepared meals for them. Given these excessive provisions before something was returned, this also necessitated that the recipient of the provision gave back directly to their host. The host in Couchsurfing (the original provider) wanted to be respected and receive something in return for the many hospitable provisions. More specifically, they wanted a reciprocal relationship from their guest in the same setting. This need to give back in the same setting differed from what has been previously understood about reciprocation in a broader community. A reciprocal response did not need to be given back to the original provider in the relationship for as long at the provider received back from someone else in the community (Molm, 2010). This would hold true if the interpretation of a give-and-take relationship was about hosting and being hosted in return. However, Couchsurfers reiterated that it was more about the social experiences and what the guest could bring of themselves in that setting than of being hosted in return by that individual or others in the community.

Thirdly, observing real-world reciprocal exchange dynamics revealed that there were additional dynamics to consider in a reciprocal exchange. One of the individuals in the exchange

often provided or gave back generously – which made it difficult to recognise whether these individuals were able to maximise their rewards. This dynamic could also be confused as a form of altruism (Belk, 2010; Thye, 2000; Thye et al. 2006). However, the requirements for a reciprocal exchange under social exchange theory remained. These generous individuals expected something in return (Blau, 1964).

The impact of this generosity appeared to be an essential component of why those on the receiving end become hosts themselves. They continued the cycle by reciprocating with others in the community because they still felt like that had something more to give back (Molm, 2010). This dynamic of giving back to others in the community potentially sheds insight into what maintains the sustainability of these reciprocal societies.

6. Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

This study set out to explore social interactions within a non-monetary sharing economy setting, namely Couchsurfing, in view of finding relevance for social exchange theory. The first objective of this research study was to understand the social nature of these Couchsurfing interactions by clarifying the reciprocal dynamics. This study clarified that a reciprocal response can happen at various points during the interaction based on provisions that came with a hospitable environment. There was also no time frame during the Couchsurfing interaction where the reciprocal response needed to happen because it was not about subsequently following the provision (Neo et al., 2013). Although, the necessity for reciprocity during the same Couchsurfing interaction was still required.

Reciprocity in Couchsurfing also emphasised the need for a social exchange, such opportunities to converse and get to know about each other (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). These social interactions among community members were reciprocal and perpetual. They emerged naturally as both the host and the guest constantly found ways to create opportunities to socialise and keep the reciprocal exchange ongoing (Davlembayeva et al, 2020; Geiger et al., 2018). It can be concluded that the social nature of the interaction was co-created and collaborative to keep the reciprocal exchange flowing between each other.

The second research objective was around exploring measures that Couchsurfers used to ensure that the interaction was reciprocal. The research findings gave insight into how these individuals deliberated on the adequacy of what was provided and what was given in return. Couchsurfers considered the cumulative Couchsurfing experience when thinking about the

exchange being collaborative and reciprocal. They relied on their subjective feelings of when the reciprocal response was enough (Blau, 1964, 1986; Emerson, 1976). There was also an allowance for a delay of the reciprocal response while further provisions were made, often by the host (Neo et al., 2013). The notable generosity, often as a hospitable gesture by the host, added to the imbalance of the reciprocal exchange. These factors left Couchsurfers feeling that either they wanted to give back more, or they had not received enough in return.

Sometimes there was only so much that could be reciprocated during the Couchsurfing interaction, mostly because those on the receiving end of the hospitable provisions happened to be the guest travelling on a tight budget. Yet, these individuals wanted to keep fulfilling on their need to continue reciprocating after the Couchsurfing interaction with either the host or someone new in the community (Molm, 2010). Individuals were self-governed by their feelings of wanting to give back further (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). It can be concluded that the subjective need to wanting to give back and the added complexity of generous provisions during the exchange ensured to the continuity of reciprocity – even to the point that it continued after the initial Couchsurfing interaction. These factors that led to the ongoing necessity for reciprocity was important for the sustainability of Couchsurfing and social environments like Couchsurfing.

The research also revealed that the reciprocal exchange was not always reciprocal for both individuals. There were those who were left wanting more from the reciprocal exchange while interacting with their counterpart. It was at this point where the reciprocal exchange became negotiated (Blau, 1964; Cook & Emerson, 1978; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Couchsurfers expressed their expectations of a reciprocal return but these were not often stated directly to their exchange partner. Instead, Couchsurfers made their expectations apparent to

others in the community, such as through a negative reference or as a post on their own online profile. These overtly stated expectations were a means of protecting themselves from future abuse. It was not clear from the research to what extent these explicit expectations affected reciprocity at a community level, but it did leave some Couchsurfers wary of engaging with those who made their expectations obvious. These explicit expectations were frowned upon because it took away from the feeling that the voluntary act of giving back. Building onto the measures that Couchsurfers took to ensure the exchange was reciprocal, any communicated expectations became harmful to the continuity of a general reciprocal dynamic in Couchsurfing of being hosted or hosting individuals even though Couchsurfers thought it appropriate to address non-reciprocity in the best manner they thought reasonable (Blau, 1964; Cook & Emerson, 1978; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

The third research objective was to explore the impact that altruism had on the social nature of the interaction. There were indications that members of the Couchsurfing community believed that their actions were altruistic because they did not expect their favour to be returned. Even the evidence of generosity in Couchsurfing could have been an indication towards altruism in these sharing economy communities (Belk, 2010, 2014a). Despite Couchsurfers being generous or denying their expectations of wanting their favour returned based on their cultural beliefs (Coulson et al., 2014), there was still a need for a reciprocal exchange (Molm, 2010; Neo et al., 2013). Therefore, this study concluded that any altruistic intentions were another form of voluntarily reciprocating without being fully aware of the expectations that they had about getting something in return (Blau, 1964; Molm, 2010).

There was another scenario where the circumstances might have been interpreted as altruistic. These circumstances involved Couchsurfers benefitting quite a lot from former

interactions and thus, these individuals chose to host only. These individuals still felt like they had more to give back to the community. They preferred only benefitting intrinsically as they passed on their wisdom or having felt fulfilled by knowing that they had helped someone out that was once like them. This behaviour of being fulfilled to give back to others has been seen in other digital or online gaming communities (Chou, 2015). This suggested for more careful consideration in future research on altruism because there could be former feelings of indebtedness that had triggered an action that appeared altruistic.

The fourth research objective was to understand how both individuals in the exchange maximised their benefits. These individuals were motivated by the social benefits available from the Couchsurfing interaction (e.g. a sense of belonging, alleviating loneliness) more so than by the tangible benefits on offer (e.g. a cooked meal or a gift). This finding would mean that a reciprocal interaction that had been driven by social norms (as opposed to market norms) was beneficial to both parties when the outcomes remained socially and experientially based (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The emphasis on having collaborated with others in the Couchsurfing community to feel a sense of belonging and part of a community of like-minded individuals helped form stronger reciprocal bonds. This also gave them the benefit that they had gained from having formed a friendship from the exchange, even if it was momentarily.

Those reciprocating during a Couchsurfing exchange were even prepared to spend more money than they would have had, had they opted to use another form of accommodation. Sometimes individuals interacting with each other tried to out-give each other. These findings of generosity in the environment could challenge social exchange theory regarding how individuals would want to maximise their gain. Although, the emphasis on the social nature of the interactions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) might suggest that it was not about the losses

incurred from the tangible exchange. Instead, for as long as the generous provision led to a social activity, these individuals were both mutually able to feel rewarded from maximising their social benefits.

Eventually, the opportunity to maximise these social benefits were reduced after several years of being a Couchsurfer. The effort of hosting or using the Couchsurfing platform as a guest had outweighed the opportunity to maximise their gain (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). These individuals recognised that the opportunities to maximise their social rewards were reduced once they had experienced fewer connections with like-minded Couchsurfers and the prospect of forming new friendships were unlikely. As such, they sought other environments where the exchange dynamics required less effort and more assurances. These former Couchsurfers moved to commercial type platforms where the social interaction was minimal, but they benefitted from the ease and comfort of the experience. The conclusion drawn from these circumstances suggested that the reciprocal journey came to an end when these individuals could no longer maximise the benefits from the broader ecosystem – as opposed not being able to maximise their benefits during one Couchsurfing exchange.

6.2. Limitations of the research

There were five limitations that were worth discussing regarding this current study. These five speak to the sampling procedures, a data collection limitation that occurred during fieldwork, a possible analysis paradigm to enhance the interpretation of terminology that had been used by participants in the research, the interpretive biases perhaps still present in the results, and the use of the current research approach in view of finding relevance for social exchange theory.

This study was limited by the convenience sampling method used. The researcher relied on those who were available to be hosted and ultimately participate in the research because of the restrictions that were set out by Couchsurfing in terms of who could be approached by the researcher and the limited time to conduct immersions as part of the fieldwork. Despite this study identifying many commonalities among the diverse group of individuals, the sample could have been refined further in terms of nationality and cultural background. There were cultural nuances that were present in the form of gift giving, their approach to reciprocity, and their perceptions of what was acceptable when gaining in return. It would be recommended that a future study considered refining the sample frame to be more representative across diverse groups or limit the exploration to a specific group of Couchsurfers.

The selection of hosts and guests by the researcher could have been biased. The researcher chose to host or stay with individuals he would usually approach when engaging with Couchsurfing. This carried with it an inherent selection bias where those who had shared values and similar interests to the researcher may have been included in the research. Despite the research including a participant who had not shared the exact same values as the other participants, this may have been more by accident than intentional. This limitation in the study alludes to a possible sampling bias where similar thinking occurs between individuals. To overcome this bias, it would require a different research approach. This alternative research approach could either determine the extent of these findings from this research study through quantitative measures or future researchers could actively recruit for participants who hold different values.

In addition to the convenience sampling method, the sample size achieved in this study could be questioned whether data saturation was achieved. Similar studies (e.g. Geiger et al.,

2018) with larger sample sizes had also identified similar themes to this current study. This was encouraging from a data saturation perspective. However, increasing the sample size could always illuminate further nuancing around the themes identified in this study.

This research study experienced a limitation after the completion of data collection and the analysis of the results where the publicly available information on Couchsurfing only became available post-login. When commencing this study and receiving permission from Couchsurfing, online profiles were publicly accessible. However, after certain regulation changes around personal information in California, South Africa and Europe came into effect after the data collection process was completed. This resulted in the "publicly accessible data" having become post-login data and was no longer usable from an ethical stand-point without the consent of participants prior to conducting the study. In retrospect, consent forms for the use of the participants' online data for analysis and reporting purposes should have been included – even though it was not a possible ethical violation at the time of commencing this study. This online content had to be excluded from the results and compromised the enhancement of validating the themes from the thematic analysis approach.

During the interviews with participants in this study, they used the word "sharing" as a blanket statement when describing their actions that related to an exchange (see Section 4.3.3. The concept of sharing in Couchsurfing and what Couchsurfers meant by sharing., p.150). This study concluded that sharing, as a form of exchange, was reciprocal and collaborative. Even though none of the participants objected to the interpretation of their use of the term "sharing" through the member-checking process, there was still room to debate the final interpretation. A discourse analysis study, using a hermeneutic approach to investigate and analyse what

individuals have meant by using the term “sharing” within the context of a non-monetary sharing economy, is encouraged in the future to validate the interpretation made in this study.

This study used member checking as a means of validating the themes that emerged in this research study. Having stated this, this current study could have benefitted further from another technique that minimised the subjectivity in interpretation of the results, namely intercoder reliability (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Given that the positionality of the research came from an insider perspective. The reliability of having someone outside the community identify codes from the transcripts could have enhanced the interpretation and conclusions from this study.

The explorative phenomenological nature of this current research study revealed indications of possible associations between social behaviour constructs (e.g. continuity of the reciprocal exchange and the social bonds that formed). Understandably as an explorative approach, these research methods were not ideal in providing conclusive evidence for determining any causal or correlated relationships between variables as proposed by social exchange theory. The benefit of using a quantitative research method that assisted in determining these causal associations would have better addressed the second research objective around exploring measures that Couchsurfers used to ensure that the interaction was reciprocal. This study showed that these Couchsurfers formed strong social bonds between each other. However, it was still unclear whether these strong social bonds were conclusively the result of a reciprocal exchange as well as whether they were independent of expectations being managed upfront.

Lastly, coming from a social exchange theory perspective and using a phenomenological research approach had not indicated clearer whether certain power dynamics were present within the reciprocal interactions. The research results alluded to possible areas where a power play

could have existed. There were at least three instances where possible power dynamics were present. The first instance being that there was an imbalance between provisions and how Couchsurfers gave back to their hosts in return (Molm, 2010). The second instance was how Couchsurfers held off complaining during the interaction in fear of possibly receiving a negative reference. This possibly meant that either party could use the impending review as a way of manipulating the other into reciprocating (Molm, 2010). The third instance was when Couchsurfers chose to still give positive references or no references after their stay despite the experience being less than pleasant. While respondents gave post-hoc rationalisations for such behaviour with regards to the references, this phenomenological approach had its limitations in identifying the underlying reasons.

Even using a grounded theory analysis approach within the context of Couchsurfing (e.g. Geiger et al., 2018) had missed the opportunity to assess possible power imbalances between the host and the guest. More refinement in identifying these power imbalances in Couchsurfing is required to properly assess these aspects of social exchange theory. After refining the scope towards a power-related dynamic in the social setting, it is recommended that any research design be used to ascertain these dynamics (for example, a survey design approach and the use of structural equation modelling has potential to explicate these possible power imbalances present in Couchsurfing).

6.3. Recommendations for future research

The sharing economy is broad and there are still initiatives around trying to cluster these platforms together into homogenous groupings (Schor, 2016; Frenken & Schor, 2017). The complexity of any of these sharing economy platforms should not be comparable to another until the full extent of each environment is fully understood. There has been a movement within the

literature that have refined these contexts (e.g. Benoit et al., 2017; Palgan et al., 2017). For now, there appeared to be a concentration on knowledge sharing platforms (e.g. Tsai & Kang, 2019; Wang et al., 2015; Yan et al., 2016) and peer-to-peer accommodation platforms (e.g. Geiger et al., 2018; Huber, 2017). Even within these sub-groupings, it is still essential to identify specific settings, such as BikeShare (e.g. e.g. Ma et al., 2019) Couchsurfing (e.g. Harvey et al., 2014). The diversity of these platforms also extends into the non-digital world, like the seed-sharing community that the researcher came across during the study.

The benefit of this research, like others that have chosen a specific setting, like Couchsurfing (e.g. Geiger et al., 2018; Parigi et al., 2013; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020), have revealed more about the social behaviour within the sharing economy from various theoretical perspectives. Studies that continue to hone into a specific setting are likely to reveal more about what brings people together and build on the existing body of knowledge.

Social exchange theory has previously been informed by controlled studies in laboratories (e.g. Homans, 1961) or research in close-knit community settings (e.g. Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). More so, contributions to social exchange theory have recently been framed by behaviour in organisations (e.g. Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Wayne, Shore & Liden, 1997). This current study together with a few other studies (e.g. Geiger et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2019; Priporas et al., 2017; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020; Tsai & Kang, 2019; Wang et al., 2019) have shown that the non-monetary sharing economy has offered another setting from which to contribute towards reviewing various aspects of social exchange theory.

The pre-conceived idea of sharing being altruistic (Belk, 2010, 2014a, 2014b) has given another opportunity to assess the applicability and relevance of social exchange theory. The continued effort to evaluate what sharing has entailed in these sharing economy environments

continued to reaffirm what was already been known by the theoretical framework – that sharing has been reciprocal in nature because it has enabled social bonds to form in the process (Blau, 1986; Geiger et al., 2018). The benefit of continued exploration around the nature of sharing or possible indications of altruism could also bring new insights around concepts or facets of this theoretical framework. This current study revealed two factors around altruism, and it has been recommended that these factors are explored further.

One of the factors related to the hospitable host or the evidence that suggested that Couchsurfers were generous during their exchange. This generosity has challenged the premise that individuals wanted to maximise their gains according to social exchange theory (e.g. Homans, 1958). While this study provided a possible explanation that Couchsurfers maximised their gains socially, these conclusions still required further confirmation that generous actions were not actually a form of altruism evident in the community.

Another factor relating to altruism was that the reciprocal exchange was based on a broader ecosystem of giving and taking. This has meant that someone might appear to be just providing in the environment but this current study revealed that they still got something back from the interaction (see Section 4.4.2.11. The fulfilment of inspiring others., p.171). Future research on altruism needs to consider historical social exchanges because the altruistic actions could just be a delayed, indirect reciprocal response (Molm, 2010).

There were indications that individuals reciprocated with others in a broader community – in this case, other travellers. While it was not common for someone to reciprocate outside of the Couchsurfing community, it remained to seen how an indirect reciprocal exchange affected those receiving this gesture. These reciprocated gestures of helping people outside of the

Couchsurfing environment might be related to a hospitable experience or generosity, like that found in the Couchsurfing exchange. In using social exchange theory as a framework.

The nuancing of the social, experiential and intrinsic benefits from the reciprocal interaction could be loosely aligned to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954/1971; Maslow, 1971). This conclusion might be premature, and it requires further unpacking. Although, a question emerged whether the way an individual engages in a reciprocal exchange to maximise their rewards could be related to a hierarchy of needs. In other words, those choosing to exchange socially instead of a commercially might be looking to these social, experiential or intrinsic benefits because their needs lower down have been taken care of. However, when individuals were Couchsurfing, they were on a tighter budget and yet, they still pursued higher up needs (e.g. they were willing to spend more money to enhance the social experience). This possible dynamic requires further exploration in order to ascertain any explanation around the trade-off between needs and whether there is continued support for social exchange theory.

This study alluded to potential cross-cultural dynamics around hospitality and the generosity provided by some hosts. Given that past research has attempted to explore interactions across cultural groupings, perhaps a cross-socio-economic class perspective of social interactions appears to be lacking. This is in view that these exchange platforms, like Couchsurfing, are limited to middle-class and more affluent individuals (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Mathangi & Rajeswari, 2018). There have been conclusions of a like-minded community existing across cultural groups, but the question remains whether individuals from across socio- economic classes come together and find that like-mindedness through the social exchange (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015). Further research into the impact of reciprocal dynamics across socio-economic groups could provide further insight into the power dynamics at play as described by social

exchange theory and potential hidden inappropriate behaviours (e.g. hiding away expensive purchases while staying for free) as that found by Chen (2018).

Lastly, there is an opportunity to better understand online contributions as they have taken place within these digital-only non-monetary sharing economy environments, for example, Wikipedia, HitchWiki.org or Wikitravel. During the research, there was brief mention of why someone would reciprocate on platform when they used the information as opposed to just using the information for their own benefit.

"Wikitravel I never contributed… I think it's a bit more conventional on Wikitravel … (WikiTravel) doesn't add any value, it is information you could find anywhere." vs. *"I found it (HitchWiki) useful, couldn't find the info anywhere else… I did a couple of entries but I found it hard to use, then I gave up on it."* (P09/G/DS/M)

Future research studies relating to understanding the social nature of these online communities in view of social exchange theory would benefit from adopting a netnography approach. Netnography is not new to the exploration of social behaviour in the context of the sharing economy (e.g. de Rivera et al., 2017). Sometimes, the analysis of online content (as performed in current this study) has formerly been labelled as netnographic in other studies (e.g. Harvey et al., 2014) – which it is not a true account of this type of research methodology. Using the right tools and extensive processes for ethnographically exploring these online communities has yet to be established (see Kozinets, 2002, 2006).

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Annexures

Annexure 1: University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) HREC Ethics Clearance Certificate

Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)
R14/49 Radaelli

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: H17/04/26**
PROJECT TITLE	The nature, means and outcome of the interactions in a non-monetary centred sharing economy: From a social exchange theory perspective
INVESTIGATOR(S)	Mr S Radaelli
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT	Human and Community Development/
DATE CONSIDERED	21 April 2017
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved
EXPIRY DATE	3 August 2020

DATE 4 August 2017 **CHAIRPERSON** pp (Professor J Knight)

cc: Supervisor : Dr F Donald

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Secretary at Room 10004, 10th Floor, Senate House, University. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee. **I agree to completion of a yearly progress report.**

Signature 04/08/2017 Date

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Annexure 2: Permission from Couchsurfing Ordered Chronologically

From: **Couchsurfing Support** <support@couchsurfing.zendesk.com>
Date: 19 May 2017 at 20:17
Subject: [Couchsurfing Support] Re: Warning: Sending surveys on Couchsurfing
To: Stephano Radaelli <stephrad@gmail.com>

If you'd like to send a reply, please reply to this email.

Amelia (Couchsurfing Support)
May 19, 11:17 PDT

Hi Stephano,

Thanks for following up with additional information. Couchsurfing does not provide any internal support or preparation for individuals using our community for research related purposes. If you would like to continue to do so, it will need to be within our Terms of Use.

If you are directly hosting surfers or staying with hosts and you would like to ask them about their experiences, you are more than welcome to do so with their permission & consent. However, we kindly ask that you do not send out messages or post in groups soliciting individuals to participate in your research.

I'm really sorry that we can't be of any better assistance at this point and thanks again for your interest!

Kind Regards,

Amelia
Trust & Safety Team
Couchsurfing

Stephano Radaelli
May 14, 10:51 PDT

Dear Amelia,

Thank you for your response. My intention is not to send out surveys. Rather, at the will of the member, they can participate in a one-on-one interview /

conversation about their experience with Couchsurfing. There is no risk to the reputation of Couchsurfing. The request to participate in the study is independent but given that the context is around Couchsurfing, I am required by the university to supply consent by the platform I wish to use.

Is there any way that before a service related email be sent back, the letter that I have sent through previously be taken to management in order to answer this in view of what I am really asking (i.e. not survey based solicitation but rather speaking to the Couchsurfing community in order to understand their interactions better).

I am not asking Couchsurfing to send out any communication in this regard. Instead, in my private capacity, I will ask guests face-to-face if they would like to participate voluntarily in the study (which involved a one-on-one discussion).

Kind regards
Stephano

Amelia (Couchsurfing Support)
May 14, 10:10 PDT

Hello Stephano,

Thank you again for your interest in studying Couchsurfing as part of your PhD. In your proposal you stated that you want to send messages to individuals to interview them about their experiences. Unfortunately, sending out unsolicited messages to members about surveys or research is outside of our Community Guidelines and Terms of Use, as it can be considered spam.

As we mentioned previously, if you look around the site, I'm sure you can find a lot of great information!

Again, I'm really sorry that we can't be of any better assistance regarding your research request. Best of luck during your studies!

Kind Regards,

Amelia
Trust & Safety Team

Couchsurfing

Stephano Radaelli

May 14, 08:30 PDT

This is a follow-up to your previous request #459421 "Request for permission to use Couchsurfing as the basis for a PhD research study"

Dear Billy

Thank you for getting back to me so quickly. Unfortunately, the response is not sufficient to obtain approval from the ethics committee because the original request was answered sufficiently. I am asking for permission to speak to Couchsurfing members as part of my PhD studies. Please review the original request to get a fuller understanding of what is required from the research.

Kind regards
Stephano

Attachment(s)
Letter to Couchsurfing220317v04.doc

Here is a link to your request if you would rather reply here: (#495105)

This email is a service from Couchsurfing Support.

Annexure 3: Letter Addressed to Couchsurfing for Permission to Conduct the Research Study

PSYCHOLOGY
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (SHCD)

Private Bag 3, Wits, 2050 • Tel: 011 717 4541 • Fax: 011 717 4559 • E-mail: psych.SHCD@wits.ac.za

Dear Couchsurfing Management

RE: Request for permission to use Couchsurfing as the basis for a PhD research study

I am a registered student at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa studying towards a PhD in Psychology. I am pursuing a study that aims to describe and explore the interactions that take place between members of a non-monetary based sharing economy, like Couchsurfing. As such, I am requesting permission to spend time and speak to members of Couchsurfing to understand their participation and their interactions in this non-monetary environment. In addition, I would like to use the current content that members post on their public profiles and in public discussion forums for analysis purposes.

Members of Couchsurfing will be asked to participate in a one-on-one discussion with the researcher after their stay with the host in order for them to describe and narrate their most recent Couchsurfing experience. The collection and use of information from the profiles of Couchsurfing members and discussion forums will be what is accessible publically and in adherence to your company's terms and conditions regarding academic research. The researcher will collect the information online with no additional assistance required from Couchsurfing business intelligence analysts or data analysts.

Couchsurfing has been identified as an ideal platform from which to conduct this research study because the platform has an established market, continues to see continued growth and is one of the few successful sharing economies. This offers key insights into consumer behaviour and social psychology because more and more people are showing an affinity towards interacting without common utilities or resources like money.

The University of the Witwatersrand Ethics Committee's approval for this study is on the condition that this study receives your approval. Confirmation of the Ethics Approval will be submitted to Couchsurfing management upon receipt from the ethics committee.

The addendum to this letter provides more detail regarding this study. For any further information, please contact me, Stephano Radaelli (Student no. 0503004H), on +27 82 645 3041 or stephrad@gmail.com. My Supervisor is Prof Fiona Donald. She may be contacted on +27 (0)11 717 4507 or Fiona.Donald@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,

Stephano Radaelli

Addendum

Title of the Study: The nature, means and outcome of the interactions in a non-monetary centred sharing economy: From a social exchange theory perspective.

Purpose: The role of such a study will better assist in defining, understanding and explaining consumption as it happens in a non-monetary sharing economy. This will form a departure point that will lead to generating differentiation between the sharing and traditional based economies. More so, this study will contribute significantly to the on-going theoretical explanations in the sharing economy.

Benefits: There will not be any direct benefits or disadvantages from participating in this study. However, the study could have indirect benefits whereby people become further advocates for the sharing economy. Upon completion of the research, Couchsurfing management will receive a draft copy of the thesis, which will include the research findings.

Research Methodology: There are two research studies that will be conducted. The first research study will involve spending time with individuals as they participate as guests in the Couchsurfing environment in order to inform the one-on-one discussions that will follow sequentially (i.e. ethnographies). During the time spent with the guest, the researcher wants to see whether people are indeed sharing (i.e. being altruistic), collaborating (i.e. seeking equality in the interaction) and/or exchanging (i.e. self-gratification) in this environment. During the discussions, participants will have an opportunity to talk about their Couchsurfing experience and explain their behaviour as it relates to sharing, collaborating and/or exchanging. The second study will involve gathering the readily available information on the public profile of the member, discussions in certain public forums, and the communication that occurs between the host (i.e. researcher) and guest (i.e. participant) of the Couchsurfing platform (i.e. netnographies). These sources of information will be used to understand online behaviour of consumers as they interact with others when using Couchsurfing (i.e. profiles, peer reviews, requests and opinions communicated on forums).

Participants automatically qualify to participate in the study when they send a request to stay at the residence of the researcher as a guest. Participation in this study is voluntary and members will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way if they decide to (or not to) participate. All requests will be treated in the same way and no one will be discriminated against unfairly.

Information about the Researcher: Stephano Radaelli has been an active member of Couchsurfing since 2011. He has been both a guest and host to a number of fellow Couchsurfers. He understands the etiquette of being a host and his reviews on his profile speak of a positive experience by those who he has hosted.

Risks: There are no risks associated to both participants and the reputation of Couchsurfing with regards to conducting this study.

Participants' rights and confidentiality: Participants have the right to withdraw at any point during the study with no negative consequences. In order to protect the information and interviews that will be collected from participants, the participants are assured anonymity in the study and any personal identifying information will be treated confidentially and not included in the final research output. Only my supervisors, the transcriber and I will be exposed to the notes, stories shared and the content extracted from the online platform. This means that the identity of the members will be protected in the report. Should I use a quote from a member in the final report, it will be reported as participant A or B, etc. in order to ensure anonymity. Should any doubts arise during or after taking part in the study, participants have the right of access to the researcher.

Annexure 4: Participant Information Sheet

PSYCHOLOGY
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (SHCD)

Private Bag 3, Wits, 2050 • Tel: 011 717 4541 • Fax: 011 717 4559 • E-mail: psych.SHCD@wits.ac.za

Good day

I am a registered PhD student in the Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. You are invited to participate voluntarily in this research study involving members of Couchsurfing. As part of my studies, I have chosen to understand the interaction that a Couchsurfer has with other members during their stay. In addition, I am also exploring the online content that people, such as yourself, post when sending requests to hosts, such as myself.

If you agree to participate in this research study, I will have spent time with you and would like to talk to you in order to better understand your Couchsurfing experience. In order to help me when you talk about your recent Couchsurfing experience, I will have taken down some notes based on the time spent with you in order to help me remember better. These notes will be based on particular actions from our interaction (whether online or face-to-face) that I am most interested in understanding, such as, what you might have done to contribute to the interaction, or what you might have expected or wanted to get out of the interaction.

The talk involves a one-on-one conversation with you. It is estimated that the conversation will take between one to two hours. During this conversation you will be given an opportunity to discuss your personal story and experiences with Couchsurfing, your story and experience while being hosted by me, and your choice to use Couchsurfing as opposed to any other means of accommodation. Please will you be open and honest when retelling your account of events as a guest. Should you have any positive or negative feedback for me as a host, I would appreciate hearing it. This conversation will be held at a time that is convenient to you. It would be preferred

if this conversation can take place face-to-face or over a secure video calling service like Skype, WhatsApp video call, Hangouts or FaceBook Messenger video call. This conversation will be audio recorded on a digital audio Dictaphone. In addition, these video calling applications have audio-visual recording capabilities. With your permission, I would like to record the conversation via this means as well just to ensure I have a back-up in case the digital audio Dictaphone fails to record or the sound quality is poor. The audio recordings will be stored anonymously and kept safely for analysis purposes to ensure I capture the essence of your story and the points you raise.

This research study aims to assist in defining, understanding and explaining what people are doing when participating in Couchsurfing. This is important because it helps to minimise confusion around the intentions and the behaviour of people when they use platforms like Couchsurfing.

I follow strict ethical guidelines in terms of spending time with you, taking notes, having a conversation after your stay, and audio recording this conversation. There are no risks or benefits associated with your participation in this study and you are assured anonymity in the thesis and any other publications. Neither Couchsurfing management nor anyone else beside me, the transcriber of the audio recording and my supervisors will know that you participated in this research study. In order for my study to meet ethical guidelines set by the University of the Witwatersrand, your information, conversation with me and notes associated with your stay will be treated confidentially and no personal identifying information will provided in the final report. This means that your identity will be protected in the report. Should I use a quote from you in the final report, it will be reported as participant A or B, etc. in order to ensure anonymity.

In order to ensure that I capture and interpret your story and experience as you understand it, I would like to audio record the conversation and send both the transcript and the analysis of my interpretation back to you for your verification and feedback. More so, upon request, I can send you a summary of the research once it is completed.

You are reminded that your participation in this research study is voluntary. This means that you are not obliged to participate at all or you can withdraw from the study at any time without any

sort of penalty or consequence. You are also reassured that your membership with Couchsurfing will not be impacted whether you choose to participate or not participate in this research study.

For more information, please contact me, Stephano Radaelli (Student no. 0503004H), on +27 82 645 3041 or stephrad@gmail.com. My Supervisor is Prof Fiona Donald. She may be contacted on +27 (0)11 717 4507 or Fiona.Donald@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,

Stephano Radaelli

Annexure 5: Informed Consent Form

PSYCHOLOGY
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (SHCD)

Private Bag 3, Wits, 2050 • Tel: 011 717 4541 • Fax: 011 717 4559 • E-mail: psych.SHCD@wits.ac.za

I, _____, have read the participant information sheet and the below summary and understand the conditions of the research study.

Background: Stephano Radaelli is a registered PhD student in the Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. Stephano has chosen to understand the interaction that a Couchsurfer has with other members during their stay.

Title of the Study: The nature, means and outcome of the interactions in a non-monetary centred sharing economy: From a social exchange theory perspective.

Purpose: You are being asked to participate in this study because of your experience with Couchsurfing. This research study aims to assist in defining, understanding and explaining what people are doing when participating in Couchsurfing. The purpose of this conversation during and after your stay is to discuss your experiences with Couchsurfing, specifically pertaining to what you might have done to contribute to the interaction, or what you might have expected or wanted to get out of the interaction.

Procedure:

1. If you agree to participate in this research study, Stephano Radaelli will spend time with you as a host or guest..
2. You will be given an opportunity during and after your Couchsurfing experience to talk about your recent Couchsurfing experience.

3. If you accept to participation, it would be appreciated if you would be open and honest when retelling your account of events as a guest. Should you have any positive or negative feedback for Stephano, as a host, he would appreciate hearing it.

Risks: There are no risks associated with your participation in this study and you are assured anonymity in the thesis and any other publications that follow suit.

Benefits: There will not be any direct benefits or disadvantages from participating in this study.

Costs: There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study.

Participants' rights and confidentiality: You are reminded that your participation is voluntary in this research study. This means that you are free to decline to answer any questions and you have the right to withdraw at any point during the study with no negative consequences. You are also reassured that your membership with Couchsurfing will not be impacted whether you choose to participate or not participate in this research study. You have the right to remain anonymous during the study and your information (i.e. the recorded conversation and notes taken by the researcher) will be treated confidentially. Neither Couchsurfing management nor anyone else beside the researcher, the transcriber of the audio recording and my supervisors will know that you participated in this research study. Your identity will be protected in the report. Should the researcher use a quote from you in the final report, it will be reported as participant A or B, etc. in order to ensure anonymity. Should any doubts arise during or after taking part in the study, you have the right to contact the researcher at any time. The researcher's contact details are shown below. More so, regardless of your choice to participate in this research study or not, you will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

For more information, please contact the researcher, Stephano Radaelli (Student no. 0503004H), on +27 82 645 3041 or stephrad@gmail.com. The Supervisor associated to this study is Prof Fiona Donald. She may be contacted on +27 (0)11 717 4507 or Fiona.Donald@wits.ac.za.

I, _____, am willing to participate in Stephano Radaelli's research study entitled "The nature, means and outcome of the interactions in a non-monetary centred sharing economy: From a social exchange theory perspective". Please make a cross on whichever applies:

YES	NO

_____ on the ___ day of _____ 20__ at _____

Participant's signature

_____ on the ___ day of _____ 20__ at _____

Researcher's signature

(Stephano Radaelli)

Annexure 6: Consent Form to Audio Record the Interview

PSYCHOLOGY
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (SHCD)

Private Bag 3, Wits, 2050 • Tel: 011 717 4541 • Fax: 011 717 4559 • E-mail: psych.SHCD@wits.ac.za

Good day

Thank you for being willing to participate in this study. In order to ensure that I capture and interpret your story and experience as you describe it, I will need to audio record the conversation by means of a digital audio Dictaphone.

There are no risks associated with the conversation being audio recorded. You are assured anonymity in the study and any personal identifying information captured on audio during the conversation will be excluded from the analysis. Neither Couchsurfing management nor anyone else beside me, my supervisors and the transcriber of the audio conversation will hear the audio recordings. In order for my study to meet ethical guidelines set by the University of the Witwatersrand, your information divulged during the conversation with me will be treated confidentially and no personal identifying information can be traced back to you in the final report. Rather, pseudonyms, like participant A or B, etc., will be used for reporting purposes in order to ensure anonymity.

There are strict ethical procedures around the safe storage of these audio recordings. No one besides the researcher, the transcriber and the supervisors will have access to this information. These audio recordings and the transcripts will only be used for analysis purposes linked to this PhD study and subsequent academic journal articles or conference presentations or proceedings where the researcher is author or co-author.

Should you have any doubts about the conversation being audio recorded, you have the right to contact and access the researcher at any time. Should you choose for the audio recording to be destroyed or excluded from the analysis, the researcher will oblige willingly without prejudice or penalties. The researcher's contact details are shown below.

Regardless of your choice to have the conversation audio recorded or not, you will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

For more information, please contact me, Stephano Radaelli (Student no. 0503004H), on +27 82 645 3041 or stephrad@gmail.com. My Supervisor is Prof Fiona Donald. She may be contacted on +27 (0)11 717 4507 or Fiona.Donald@wits.ac.za.

I, _____, have read the above and understand the conditions of the one-on-one conversation being audio recorded. Do you give full consent for this audio recording to be used in the study?

YES	NO

_____ on the ___ day of _____ 20__ at _____

Participant's signature

_____ on the ___ day of _____ 20__ at _____

Researcher's signature

(Stephano Radaelli)

Annexure 7: Discussion Guide for Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured. This discussion guide was used to guide the conversation. All questions remained broad and the direction of the questioning was determined by the responses. The probing questions were used to stimulate conversation and encourage a deeper understanding of the thoughts and opinions of the research participants.

DISCUSSION GUIDE SEMI-STRUCTURED

Reminder of the research questions

How does the nature of the interaction impact on the outcome of the interaction in a non-monetary sharing company?

This requires identifying:

- Whether the nature of the interaction that occurs in a non-monetary, intermediated sharing economy is in essence sharing, collaborating and/or exchanging?
- Whether the outcomes of the interaction in a non-monetary, intermediated sharing economy are *economic, social, environmental and/or experiential?*

In addition to these overarching research questions, there are other research questions that need to be addressed in this research study.

- How does social exchange theory substantiate the nature of the interaction in a non-monetary sharing company?
- What influence does the outcome of the interaction have on continued participation in a non-monetary sharing economy?
- How do consumers perceive the social benefits that are potentially offered during the interaction?
- How does trust manifest itself within the context of Couchsurfing – what enables trust to pre-exist and/or under which circumstances would trust emerge during the interaction?

Introduction

Build rapport by ensuring the research participants are at ease. Start with a casual conversation before leading with the questions in this guide. Remind them the audio recording is for research purposes and that all personal identifying information will be removed when transcribed. Only the researcher and the supervisors will have access to the audio recordings. Furthermore, assure them that all information will be treated confidentially. Place the recorder out of direct line of sight if possible to avoid intimating the person before the interview begins.

- Tell me a bit about yourself? SOMETIMES THESE TOPICS WILL HAVE BEEN DISCUSSED BEFORE BUT REMIND THEM THAT YOU ARE ASKING THEM AGAIN FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES.
- What are the things you are passionate about in life? What excites, energises or drives you? NOTE: IF TRAVEL, SOCIALISING OR MEETING LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE, PROBE FURTHER AROUND THESE THEMES.

  PROBE FURTHER:
  - How do you pursue these passions?
  - What do this passion offer you? What does it energise you?

Couchsurfing Journey

- Let's talk about Couchsurfing… please tell me about the time you first joined Couchsurfing?
- How did you first hear about Couchsurfing? What was going through your mind when you first heard about it?
- What, if anything, did you think this platform would offer you? What were your expectations? Why did you join Couchsurfing?
- How, if at all, did Couchsurfing fulfil these expectations?
- How, if at all, did Couchsurfing fall short?
- What are the lessons you learned along your journey?
- How would you describe most of the people who you have met, stayed with and/or hosted on Couchsurfing?
- What qualities do you look for in people when staying with them or hosting them?

Couchsurfing Interactions

- Let's talk about one or two of the fondest memories when you were either a guest or a host using Couchsurfing? ALLOW THE PARTICIPANT TO RECALL AS MUCH DETAIL OF THE EXPERIENCE

  PROBE FURTHER:
  - What was it about this time that you really enjoyed?
  - What was the relationship like during the entire time when you were with this fellow Couchsurfer?
  - How would you describe the interaction between this person during this entire time?

- Let's talk about one or two bad experiences when you were either a guest or a host using Couchsurfing? ALLOW THE PARTICIPANT TO RECALL AS MUCH DETAIL OF THE EXPERIENCE.

  PROBE FURTHER:
  - What really made the experience bad?
  - How did you respond to this/these individual(s)? And how did they react?
  - How would you describe the interaction between this person during this entire time?

- Now, let's talk about the most recent Couchsurfing experience?

  PROBE FURTHER:
  - Why did you choose to stay or host this person? What about them said that this/these people would make you feel uncomfortable hosting/staying with them?
  - How would you describe the interaction that you had with this person?

Annexure 8: Couchsurfing Safety Tab

a) b)

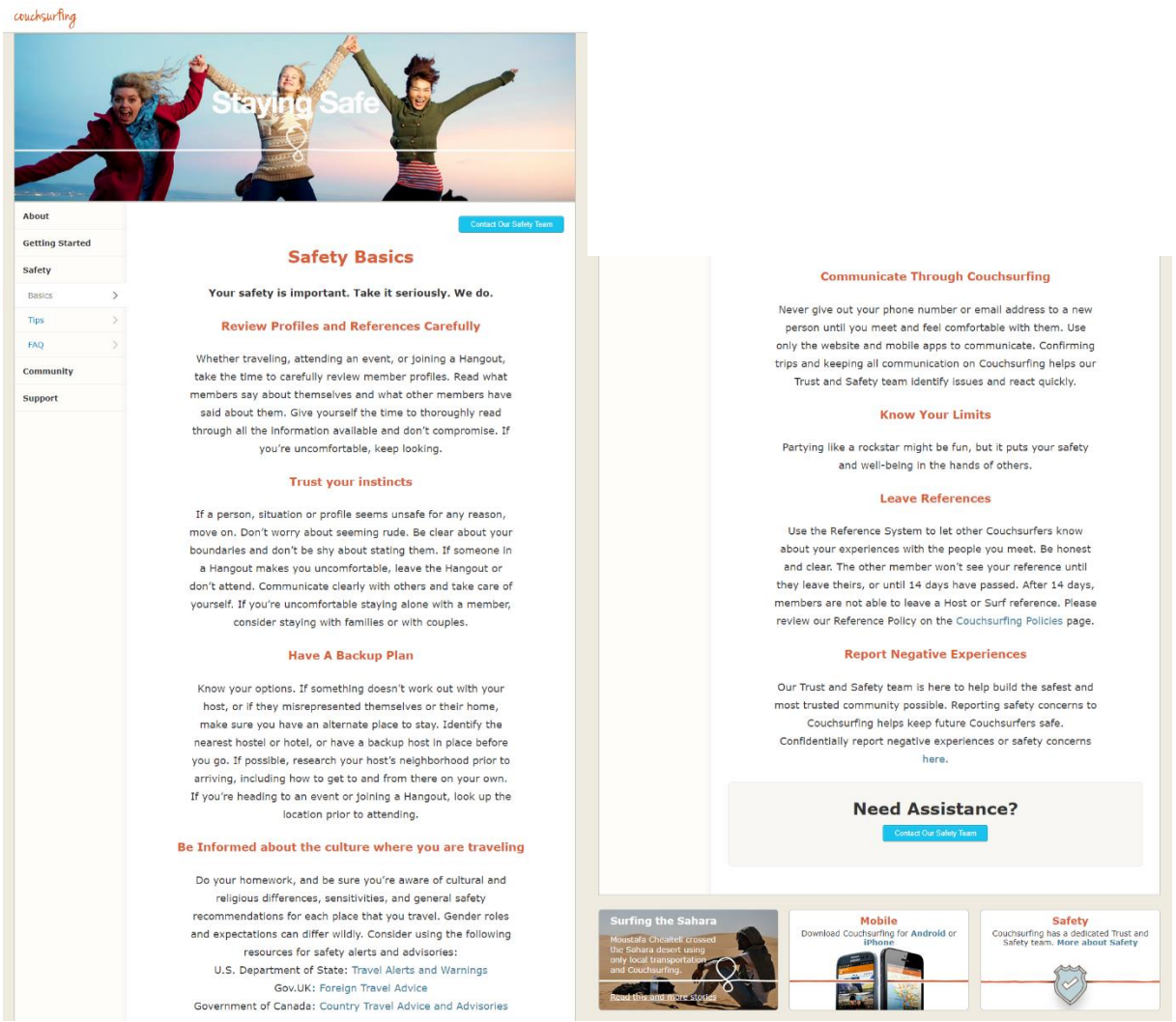


Figure A 1: Excerpts from the safety tab on the Couchsurfing website,

https://www.couchsurfing.com/about/safety/ (Couchsurfing, 2020b).

Annexure 9: Coding Frame and Generated Themes

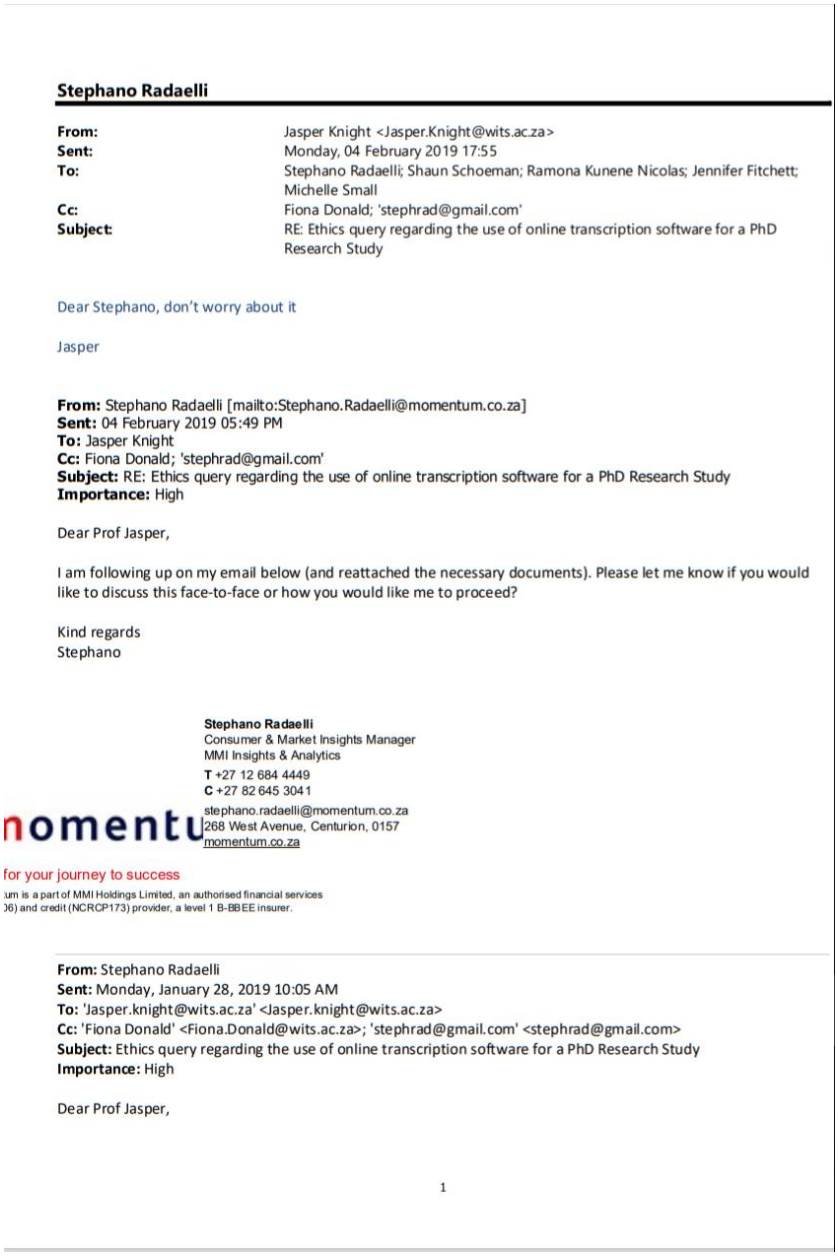
Table A 1

Coding frame (Overarching category) and revised themes

Overarching Category	Revision of themes
Contextual themes	• The authentic traveller • Searching for meaning while travelling • Sense of belonging • Elevated status and recognition • Growth and development • Artificially extending your lifespan (i.e. feel like you are living longer) • Leaving a legacy
The traveller's guide to CouchSurfing	• CouchSurfing is not just about 'free' accommodation • CouchSurfers trust each other • The spirit of CouchSurfing (i.e. an unspoken values system) • Being respectful, considerate and mindful • Reciprocity should come naturally • Truly wanting to connect to others
Concepts relating to the nature of the interaction	• Hospitable provisions made during the interaction • Voluntarily reciprocating and giving back • Showing appreciation by gifting • Showing appreciation: Verbal and written gratitude • Helping around the house • Sharing costs • Being present, offering their company and showing interest • Sharing in CouchSurfing • Perceived altruism in CouchSurfing • CouchSurfers have expectations • Giving to gain • Cultural nuances to reciprocation
A framework to describe the nature of the interaction	• The nature of the interaction is imbalanced and unequal • Healthy imbalance: Reciprocity is continuous • Healthy imbalance: CouchSurfers are generous • Reciprocation after the Couchsurfing stay: Continued with the same host but in a new setting • Reciprocation after the Couchsurfing stay: Give back by hosting others on CouchSurfing • Reciprocation after the Couchsurfing stay: Give back to others in the broader community • Unhealthy imbalance: One-sided and transactional • Perceived disrepect • Perceived to be taking from the environment for self-gain • Perceiving self to be acting in contrast to the 'spirit of CouchSurfing' (e.g. feeling like they had not spent enough time with their host) • Not being able to connect because they're not like-minded • Lots of effort with diminishing returns
Themes that describe the positive outcomes from the social nature of the interaction	• Sense of belonging through like-minded connections • Momentary connections that alleviates loneliness • Meaningful connections that lead to long-term friendships being formed • Shared experiences enhance the meaningful connections being formed • Feeling a sense of worth in the community • Gaining knowledge that broadens their perspective • Being inspired to accomplish more for themselves • Learning more about self

	• Experiences that were enriching and nostalgic to Couchsurfers • Notches up the experiences that one would not ordinarily have should they just be a 'tourist' • The fulfilment of inspiring others
Themes that describe the negative outcomes from the social nature of the interaction	• Dysfunctional outcomes that leads to misinformation in the community • Becoming selective and prescriptive in a self-governed community • Losing interest in using CouchSurfing

Annexure 10: Email Trail of Consultation with Representative from Wits HREC Ethics Committee using Online Transcription Services



Stephano Radaelli

From: Jasper Knight <Jasper.Knight@wits.ac.za>
Sent: Monday, 04 February 2019 17:55
To: Stephano Radaelli; Shaun Schoeman; Ramona Kunene Nicolas; Jennifer Fitchett; Michelle Small
Cc: Fiona Donald; 'stephrad@gmail.com'
Subject: RE: Ethics query regarding the use of online transcription software for a PhD Research Study

Dear Stephano, don't worry about it

Jasper

From: Stephano Radaelli [mailto:Stephano.Radaelli@momentum.co.za]
Sent: 04 February 2019 05:49 PM
To: Jasper Knight
Cc: Fiona Donald; 'stephrad@gmail.com'
Subject: RE: Ethics query regarding the use of online transcription software for a PhD Research Study
Importance: High

Dear Prof Jasper,

I am following up on my email below (and reattached the necessary documents). Please let me know if you would like to discuss this face-to-face or how you would like me to proceed?

Kind regards
Stephano

Stephano Radaelli
Consumer & Market Insights Manager
MMI Insights & Analytics
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C +27 82 645 3041
stephano.radaelli@momentum.co.za
268 West Avenue, Centurion, 0157
momentum.co.za

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for your journey to success

um is a part of MMI Holdings Limited, an authorised financial services
06) and credit (NCRCP173) provider, a level 1 B-BBEE insurer.

From: Stephano Radaelli
Sent: Monday, January 28, 2019 10:05 AM
To: 'Jasper.knight@wits.ac.za' <Jasper.knight@wits.ac.za>
Cc: 'Fiona Donald' <Fiona.Donald@wits.ac.za>; 'stephrad@gmail.com' <stephrad@gmail.com>
Subject: Ethics query regarding the use of online transcription software for a PhD Research Study
Importance: High

Dear Prof Jasper,

1

I am emailing you about a possible ethical dilemma I might be facing in my research for the PhD programme in Psychology.

I am following a qualitative research approach. Part of the process I'm adopting is to transcribe the audio-recordings myself, as suggested by the ethics committee feedback report. To assist with the transcribing process, I'm using online tools (namely, two websites) that were recommended by academics on ResearchGate (https://www.researchgate.net/post/What_is_the_best_software_for_transcription_of_interviews2).

To speed up the process, there is an "auto-transcribe" online tool offered by Wreally (see below table for the link). This is where the ethical concern arises... By uploading the audio file, it is encrypted and stored on their server because of the machine learning capability. In my consent forms (see attached), I have not specifically mentioned that I will be using this platform (given that this functionality on Transcribe by Wreally was not available at the time of my ethics submission).

Of course, the quality of the output isn't great and thus, I use another freeware online tool called OTranscribe to go through the transcript and edit it. The reason I'm using OTranscribe in addition to Transcribe by Wreally is because the audio quality is a lot better than what "Transcribe by Wreally" offers. Otranscribe doesn't store any of my uploaded content or transcript edits on a 'cloud' or 'external server'. Therefore, I feel that this platform is less of a concern ethically.

I have been in contact with my supervisors and Fiona mentioned that I should reach out to you regarding my dilemma. I wanted to resolve the issue by sending out another consent form (*which I have drafted but not attached yet*) to inform and ask my research participants permission to use the process I'm following (as described in the table below). What is your feeling relating to this approach? If you would like to discuss this face-to-face, please let me know?

STEP	DESCRIPTION OF TRANSCRIPTION PROCESS	TOOL USED AND CONFIDENTIALITY OF AUDIO-RECORDING	PERTAINING TO THE CONFIDENTIALITY OF AUDIO RECORDING
Step 1	Upload your audio file to be auto-transcribed	Transcribe by Wreally https://transcribe.wreally.com/	Confidentiality clause on website: Unlike the Transcribe audio player, the file that you choose here will be uploaded to our servers, since we need to do the speech recognition on our servers. Rest assured that we use industry-standard encryption protocols to securely upload & process your files.
Step 2	Take converted audio-to-text transcript from Wreally and use OTranscribe to verify and edit the coverted text file. Once again, I need to upload the audio file to follow the recorded conversation and edit where necessary.	OTranscribe https://otranscribe.com/	Assurance of where the data is stored: oTranscribe is designed in a way that your data (both the audio file and the written transcript) never leaves your local computer. The transcript is not kept on a remote server or "in the cloud", but is instead in the browser's local storage. The downside is that it is not possible to access your

			saved transcripts from another computer.

Kind regards
Stephano



Stephano Radaelli
Consumer & Market Insights Manager
Group Insights & Analytics

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Email: stephano.radaelli@momentum.co.za

momentum METROPOLITAN GUARDRISK multiply

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Annexure 11: Non-participants and reasons for non-participation

There were a few individuals who did not participate in the research study, but they did have a Couchsurfing experience with the researcher during the fieldwork period. For ethical purposes, no information relating to these individuals was used for analysis purposes. The details of each individual have been documented in *Table A.2: Non-participants – despite having a Couchsurfing experience with the researcher* and only the publicly accessible online information (*as permitted by Couchsurfing in their permission*) was used to give an indication of the demographics related to each individual. Given the immersive nature of the research, these lived experiences cannot be ignored completely because they were instrumental in framing future Couchsurfing experiences or assisting with the thinking process related to understanding interaction within the the Couchsurfing context. More so, these accounts aided the emergent research process as was evidenced in the reflexive diary notes.

Table A 2

Non-participants – despite having a Couchsurfing experience with the researcher during the fieldwork period

Non-respondent ID	Gender	Age	Nationality	Level of education	Role	Period at which participants was informed about the research	Date of Couchsurfing Experience	Reason for non-participation in the research
NP01/G/M	M	30	Brazil	Post-graduate	Guest	None	22 – 29 Oct 2017	Fluency in English was poor
NP02/G/F	F	31	Brazil	Post-graduate	Guest	None	22 – 29 Oct 2017	Fluency in English was poor
NP03/G/M	M	33	Argentina	Unknown	Guest	After stay (WhatsApp)	11 – 15 Nov 2017	Never managed to conduct an online interview
NP04/HO/M	M	26	France	Post-graduate	Hang-out	Before hang-out (During CS communication)	27 Nov 2017	Audio-recording was inaudible
NP05/G/M	M	27	Australia	Undergraduate	Guest	None	26 – 28 Mar 2018	Given I hadn't asked before – felt difficult to approach them about the research during or after their stay
NP06/G/F	F	24	Australia	Undergraduate	Guest	None	26 – 28 Mar 2018	Given I hadn't asked before – felt difficult to approach them about the research during or after their stay
NP07/E/MF	M (x2) F (x3)	35	South Africa	Undergraduate	Event	None	6 – 8 July 2018	Their experience as CS host or surfer was limited – only used the platform to organise local hikes
NP08/HO/F	F	42	Spain	Undergraduate	Hang-out	None	6 – 8 July 2018 & 7 March 2019	Became acquainted through Couchsurfing in SA and visited her in Spain where she showed me around the city – became friends but never invited her to participate in the research (did not have a 'true CS experience' because costs were shared AND upon visiting her in Spain, already reached data saturation)
NP09/G/M	M	26	Brazil	Masters	Hang-out & Guest	None	13 – 14 Aug 2018	Was trying to gain perspective around hosting someone without there being an option to participate in the research – felt that the CS experience was more enjoyable
NP10/G/M	M	25	Denmark	Unknown	Guest	During stay (Verbal)	17 – 19 Aug 2018	Changed phone number and lost touch
NP11/H/M	M	50+	Iran	Unknown	Host	None	3 – 5 Sep 2018 (Homestay Experience)	Not a Couchsurfing experience but a Homestay experience
NP12/G/M	M	27	Brazil	Undergraduate (Medical doctor)	Guest	Before stay (During CS communication)	24 – 27 Nov 2018	Never managed conduct an interview
NP13/G/M	M	24	Uruguay	Unknown	Guest	Before stay (During CS communication)	5 – 9 Jan 2019 (Ended his stay early)	Cut his stay short & later got removed from Couchsurfing

Annexure 12: Declaration of Originality of Work

Course Code	PSYC9001
Course Name	PHD THESIS
Surname	RADAELLI
Student Number	0503004H
Date	Monday, August 16, 2021
Supervisor Names	Prof. F Donald and Prof. A. Thatcher

DECLARATION – I HEREBY DECLARE THAT:	YES/NO
I understand what plagiarism is (using another's work and presenting it as my own).	Yes
I understand and agree that plagiarism is wrong.	Yes
I am aware of and familiar with the University of the Witwatersrand's policy on plagiarism.	Yes
I understand the importance of clearly and appropriately acknowledging my sources, using the APA referencing style where needed.	Yes
I understand that a proper paraphrase or summary of ideas/claims/content from a particular source should be written in my own words with my own sentence structure, and accompanied by an appropriate reference where needed.	Yes
I have correctly acknowledged all direct quotations and paraphrased content by way of appropriate, APA-style in-text references where needed.	Yes
I understand that antiplagiarism software (e.g. Turnitin) is a useful resource, but that such software does not provide definitive proof that a document is free of plagiarism.	Yes
I have not allowed, and will not allow, anyone to copy my work with the intention of passing it off as his or her own work.	Yes
I have not made use of inappropriate sources, such as other students' essays or online essay-sharing sites, in preparing this written work.	Yes
I understand that this assessment is an individual assessment, and I have not engaged in any inappropriate collaboration, consultation, or answer sharing in preparing this written work.	Yes
I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this is not my own unaided work, if there is any evidence of inappropriate sharing between colleagues and myself or that I failed to acknowledge the sources of the ideas or words in my writing.	Yes



Stephano Radaelli

16/08/2020