Online decision making
Couch Surfers and information technology

Student: Thao Nhu
Supervisor: Richards Ek
6/1/2012
Abstract

This study deals with how information technologies are used in tourist’s online decision making process. The thesis focuses on a forgotten new tourist segment: Couch Surfers. By using semi-structured interview and netnography to analyze websites’ content, Couch Surfers’ decision making process is studied. The main findings of the study are Couch Surfers rely heavily on information technologies especially internet to plan and make decision. Their concern about using travel agency is complex. Travel agency’s information technology applications are ignored by Couch Surfers in short and casual trip and are more used in a long haul trips, less available information about places and good offer in price and combination. The study also proves that Couch Surfer is a new generation of new tourist who is more sophisticated and more demanding in using travel information technologies as well as in making decision.

Key words: information technological application, travel information search, decision making, Couch Surfers.
1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 5
2. Theory framework.................................................................................................................. 8
   2.1 Information technology and tourism .................................................................................... 8
      2.1.1 Information technology in tourism ................................................................................. 8
      2.1.2 IT and new mainstream of consumers .............................................................................. 9
   2.2 Theory of decision making process in tourism ................................................................. 11
      2.2.1 Consumer need recognition ............................................................................................ 11
      2.2.2 Information search ......................................................................................................... 12
      2.2.3 Evaluation of alternatives .............................................................................................. 14
      2.2.4 Purchase decision ........................................................................................................... 15
      2.2.5 Post purchase behavior .................................................................................................. 15
   2.3 Theory part’s conclusion .................................................................................................... 16
3. Methodology.......................................................................................................................... 17
   3.1 A qualitative study ............................................................................................................. 17
   3.2 Inductive approach – approach to the field ...................................................................... 18
   3.3 Data collection ................................................................................................................... 18
      3.3.1 Semi-structured, qualitative interviews ......................................................................... 19
      3.3.1.1 Semi-structured interview .......................................................................................... 19
      3.3.1.2 Interview setting ........................................................................................................ 21
      3.3.1.3 Selection of informants ............................................................................................. 21
      3.3.2 Netnography (Website analysis) ..................................................................................... 24
   3.4 Data analysis ..................................................................................................................... 25
   3.5 Summary ............................................................................................................................ 26
4 Case of Couch Surfer (CSer) ................................................................................................ 28
   4.3 Introduction of Couch Surfing (CS) ..................................................................................... 28
   4.4 Couch surfers’ unique characteristics and needs in travelling .......................................... 31
   4.5 Summary ............................................................................................................................ 33
5 Couch Surfers and travel information technological applications used in trip planning .......... 34
   5.1 The most popular used travel information technological applications ......................... 34
1. Introduction

Information Technologies as computing and telecommunications technologies has been developed and impacted significantly to tourism industry (Connolly & Lee, 2006; Singh & Kasavana, 2005). As an industry which related intensively to information (Werthner and Klein, 1999), information technologies applications have been used by most of tourism’s players from suppliers, intermediaries to customers. Information technologies enhance organization’s competitiveness by transferring and managing information effectively and fluently and meet customer’s demands of in time and accurate information. On the other hand, information technologies also help travelers to access information faster and more accurate. Information technologies in this paper mainly refer to internet-related applications such as search engines, website, web 2.0, reservation system, online payment system.

In tourism, it has been shown that information technologies have great influence to consumers’ behavior (Buhalis, 1998; Poon, 1993). Internet - a large part of information technologies is mentioned as a factor that has reshaped the way of distributing travel-related information and the way tourist plan and consume travel (Buhalis and Law, 2008). It is said that “new” tourist is born with more knowledgeable who require exceptional value for money and time. They are empowered by information technologies development and internet in particular and gradually require interacting with suppliers to satisfy their own specific needs.

Recently, there is a phenomenon of dramatically increasing a tourist segment of four millions members called Couch Surfers spreading over 230 countries and territories around the world (Couch Surfing website, 2012). They are new type of tourists that sharing a common vision of “create inspiring experiences”. In Couch Surfing community, members interact and exchange information with each other via their official website: www.couchsurfing.org. The original and also the main activity of Couch Surfers is to travel in a budget way by staying in a local’s place. Thus indeed, Couch Surfers usually have free accommodation for their trip. Besides they also
have other activities to exchange their cultures and experiences by creating and joining different meeting, activities which are created by members themselves. The way Couch Surfers travel seems to be unique that would lead to some difference when they are planning their trip which made the author have a great concern on.

The unique of having a chance to have free accommodation when travelling may lead to the lack of interest of travel agency for Couch Surfers. Since travel agency usually have good contract with accommodation providers and earn profit from this area, Couch Surfers seem to be a forgotten tourist segment of travel agencies. On the other hand, with the splendid development of Couch Surfing community, Couch Surfers may threat the reduction of travel agency’s market if travel agency keeps ignore them.

Moreover, due to the fact of developing information technologies has changed, empowered and been adjusted to/ by tourists, there are a numbers of research studying on information technologies related topic. However, according to Law, Leung and Buhalis (2009), after analyzing 215 articles, websites about the relationship between information technology applications in hospitality and tourism, the number research related to consumers is relatively small compare with researches in technological development and the supplier perspective. There are study about interaction between young and better educated consumers and Internet (Beritelli, Bieger and Laesser, 2007, Seabra, Abrantes and Lages, 2007); analyzing different travelers take a trip to a certain country with the help of information teconologies (Kozak, 2007; Hyde, 2006) or about a particular tourist like Chinese (Lu and Feng, 2006). Recently, Fuchs, Ricci and Cantoni (2012) edited a book which collected updated researches mentioned some customer researches which basically focus on their interaction with new technological tool like Bluetooth-enabled decives in Lourves museum in Paris, France by Yoshimura Y. et al (2011) or GPS by Kawase J, Kurata Y. and Yabe N (2011). However, the Couch Surfers’ behavior has not been studied in particular yet. This lack of academic literature makes the author concern.

In order to add more finding from the consumer’s perspective, this study “Couch Surfers – a forgotten new tourist segment and travel information technologies” focus on Couch Surfers behaviors in using travel information technologies in their trip’s decision making process. The
aim of the thesis is to explore how Couch Surfer relates to travel information technologies especially with those from travel agency to plan and make decision for their trip. By this thesis, the author tries to fill the lack of academic literature about Couch Surfers behavior in decision making process. Besides, findings of this paper can suggest services suppliers in general and travel agency in particular to attract this expanding tourist segments. Moreover, the author also gives some suggestions to Couch Surfing benefit cooperate organization to earn profit and give more benefits to Couch Surfers.

The research question is raised as below:

- What kind of information technology applications do they usually do? (Question 1)
- How do Couch Surfers interact with travel information technology applications in travel agency? (Question 2)
- How flexible are Couch Surfers when they use information technology in decision making? (Question 3)

The thesis’s ambition is the answer three questions which are three main aspects will be studied. The first question is answered in part 5 while part 6 is used to illustrate for findings for question 2 and 3. When three questions are answered, it will help the author to reach the research aim.
2. Theoretical part:

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of the thesis. It is divided into two main parts. Section 2.1 gives brief introduction about the relationship between information technology and tourism in general as well as how it influences and is adjusted to and by new travelers. Section 2.2 presents the five-stage model of Kotler’s in tourist’s decision making. In each stage of the decision making process, the role of information technology is mentioned.

2.1 Information Technology (IT) and tourism

2.1.1 Information technology in tourism

Tourism is a business that mainly base on information. Tourism has intangible product which is untouchable and hard to assess its quality comprehensively in advance. Tourists only can consume the product when they leave their daily environment. In order to make the decision, tourists only can built an abstract model of the product by collecting information through multiple channels, such as television, magazine, brochures, word-of-mouth, or the Web. In order to have good visualized tourism products, it is required to gather information from both the consumer and supplier. Thus, it may lead to high cost in searching information.

Information technology includes software, hardware, information, management and telecommunication systems enables the information processing and flow within and between organizations, as well as all the equipment utilized for the production of commodities and the provision of services (Poon, 1993). A wide range of IT systems including several tailor-made, internal-management, networking and open distribution applications are used in tourism. Tourism organizations have used tools such as “tailor-made internal management applications, databases, knowledge management systems, dedicated internal management and distribution systems, computer Reservation Systems (CRSs), internet in general, new Internet-based travel intermediaries (e.g. Expedia, Travelocity, Preview Travel, Internet Travel Network, Priceline.com, etc.” (Buhalis in Gartner and Lime eds 2000). There is a significant increase and
influence of search engines, carrying capacity and speed of networks to tourists all over the world in planning and experiencing their travels (Buhalis and Law, 2008).

IT as computing and telecommunications technologies has been developed and impacted increasingly in all players in tourism industry (Connolly & Lee, 2006; Singh & Kasavana, 2005). Thanks to IT, the efficiency of production, the quality of services is improved, new services are born and it diffuses the whole industry (Poon, 1993). From the view of suppliers, IT assists organization to manage information dynamically and influences business competitiveness through assisting decision makers to make appropriate investments and decisions. Suppliers expect to have lower distribution costs, higher revenues and larger market share in using websites while customers expect to contact, give request and make reservation to suppliers directly at anytime and anywhere (Olmeda and Sheldon, 2001) From the view of customers, IT takes part in changing the customers’ behavior. For example, the website changes the needs of consumers, who are increasingly less loyal, take more frequent vacations of shorter duration, and take less time between choosing and consuming a tourism product (Cheyne, Downes and Legg, 2006). In short, the structure of the whole tourism industry is changed by e-commerce to a new industry with new sophisticated consumers (Poon, 1993, Cheyne, Downes and Legg, 2006).

2.1.2 Information Technology and new mainstream of consumers

New consumers in technology decades are known as more sophisticated compared with in mass tourism before. There are six key characteristics of new tourists. They are more experienced travelers; they have changed values; changed lifestyles; they are products of changing population demographics; they are more flexible and more independent-minded (Poon, 1993, p114). These new characteristics lead to new tourists’ demand of better quality, more value for money and greater flexibility in travel experience, more unique, targeted and customize holidays and more environmentally conscious and nature-oriented holiday (Poon, 1993, chapter 5). New tourist is searching for exceptional for money and time and the package tour becomes less important as independently organized tourism (Buhalis, 2000). Using a little science fiction, Yeoman and McMahon-Beattue (2006) draw two scenarios in 2015 in Scotland that freely available information including online shared experiences and flexible, convenient are still
customers’ main demands. Customers also require accurate and comprehensive information on to meet their satisfaction (Buhalis, 2000).

Poon (1993) has mentioned the detail characteristics of new tourists as below: Referring to more experienced, tourists have more travel experience, quality conscious, better educated, new comers quick to learn, more fun and adventure, more variety and special interests. They are also more flexible as they are spontaneous, hybrid consumers, unpredictable, less holiday planning and changed booking behavior. The more independent characteristics relate to risk taking, want to be different from the crowd and consumers want to be “in charge” during their free time”.

As the new tourist is the most important driving force in the new tourism, IT has been adjusted to the main stream of tourists. Besides, as tourism industry is mainly related to information (Werthner and Klein, 1999), predominant changes are relevant to information. Buhalis (2000) has showed that the development of the size and complexity of tourism demand has driven the IT usage. A series of IT – empowered developments enhancing customer satisfaction are mentioned as below:

- User-friendly and customized interfaces
- Consumers have more information and enjoy greater choice
- Better understanding of consumer needs based on research interaction and data mining
- Differentiated and customized services according to personal preferences and attitudes, rather than sociodemographic segmentation
- Consumers feel empowered to get information on products and services they are interested in
- Pricing becomes more flexible as organizations are willing to provide great discounts for last-minute, targeted offered and special promotions
- A reduction in bureaucracy and paperwork frees time for better customer service
- Customizing the product and establishing ‘one-to-one’ marketing by using intelligence collected by loyalty schemes (e.g. dietary requirements, product preferences)
• New value added services (e.g. in-flight or in-room entertainment and information channels)
• Automation of tedious operational tasks through IT (e.g. in-room TV checkout)
• Personalized services (e.g. a telephone operator acknowledges a guest by name or waiter knows dietary preferences or requirements)
• Better integration of departments and functions of organizations toward better service
• Language barriers are increasingly reduced through development of interfaces to serve all target markets and also through automatic translation
• Accurate and much richer marketing research by collecting data from all transactions and enquiries

Among above listed points, the website’s ease of use is one of the most important factors for customer to evaluate the website quality (Law, Leung and Buhalis, 2009). In addition, particularly, Wethner and Ricci (2004) mentioned the Web’s adjustment from only information collection to ordering services while later on, Pudliner (2007) confirmed and developed another function of weblogs which offer the tourists a place to share experience and communicate with each others. In 2009, Xianga and Gretzelb showed the growth of social media in online travel information search recently with web 2.0 includes various new technological applications like media and content syndication, mash-ups, AJAX, tagging, wikis, web forums and message boards, customer ratings and evaluation systems, virtual worlds, podcasting, blogs and online videos. In addition, there are more technology changes are predicted between 2005 and 2015 than the previous 150 years by Yeoman and McMahon-Beattue (2006). The forecast includes more information supports from technology to tourists such as Global Positioning System (GPS) system, significant impact of digital society to tourism information as well as wireless technologies.

On another hand, technologies not only are adjusted to tourists but also change/ facilitate/ empower them to be more demanding and sophisticated.

2.2 Theory of decision making process in tourism
IT is mentioned as having affection to all players in tourism industry. Tourists as one of the player are also impacted directly by IT. IT protects, enhances and empowers customers’ experiences and behavior (Kim & Ham, 2007; Singh, Kim, & Huh, 2006; Winata & Mia, 2005).

Travel planning is mainly considered as a complex and multi-faceted decision making process (Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000). Therefore, there are different theories of decision making in tourism research on a range types of a tourist's decision however some of them are criticized of unsuitable with fast changes within the tourism industry and technology industry. Hereafter, the five-stage model from Kotler et al (1999) of customer’s decision making process is used. Model’s authors argue that these five stages are available in all customer’s purchase no matter they are online or offline purchases. Five stages are consumer need recognition, information search, and evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behavior.

### 2.2.1 Consumer need recognition

This is first stage in buying decision when consumers aware their needs of products or services to fulfill lack of either physical or psychological (Hill and O’ Sullivan, 1996). However, in tourism industry, an individual may be not aware of a place’s potential as a travel destination until some information about the place is transferred to that person (Mill and Morrison, 2009). It is obvious to see the information approaching is the main point in this stage, either customers search information by themselves or information is reached by supplier’s marketing strategies. In the technology development decades, people can search information by many different ways thanks to the technological applications such as internet, TV, engine search, ect. It is argued that the Internet has become one of the most important sources of consumer information (Zins, 2007), especially for young and better educated consumers (Beritelli, Bieger, & Laesser, 2007; Casanova, Kim & Morrison, 2005; Seabra, Abrantes, & Lages, 2007) while printed brochures are mature and senior travelers’ preference (Lin, 2005). Lee, Soutar, & Daly, (2007) showed that many people combine both online information and offline for their trips.

### 2.2.2 Information search
After having awareness of need, customers attempt to have more knowledge about the products and services. They commence seeking out the information about their desire products and services. Hill and O’ Sullivan (1996) presented four possible sources: Internal sources, word of mouth, public information and promotional messages. Based on this step, customers can find out products’ and services’ benefits as well as the certain number ways of satisfying their needs (Hill and O’ Sullivan, 1996).

In this stage, IT applications especially search engines can be applied in above sources to assist customers to approach the information (Ho & Liu, 2005). Law and Huang (2006) found out Google is the most popular used search engine. Different gender, age, nationality, educational background, and lifestyle customers search different information (Kim, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Hallab & Gursoy, 2006).

Internal sources: “Buyers search their own memories for previous experience of satisfying a particular need” (Hill and O’ Sullivan, 1996 p.95). Cheyne, Downes, & Legg, 2006 argued that many people prefer online information and booking with their previously experience traveling to a familiar destination.

Word of mouth (WOM): WOM is ranked the most important information source when a consumer is making a purchase decision. It’s argued that customers search for unbiased advice from trusted personal contacts (Hill and O’ Sullivan, 1996). However in technology era, the version of word of mouth is electronic word of mouth (eWOM) which means the interpersonal non commercial communication is transformed from oral to online form. The eWOM has been become more and more popular within the advances of the Internet especially for more Chinese experienced internet users when purchasing hotel’s services and product (Kim, Ma & Kim, 2006). Web 2.0 tools (e.g., online discussion forums, consumer review sites, weblogs, social network sites, etc.) help customers to exchange product information (Lee, Park and Han, 2008). In tourism, tripadvisor.com is a good example of “the largest site for unbiased travel reviews” where every travelers can share their own real story and experience about places, trips they’ve done (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2007).
Public information: “Independent reports of the comparative performance of similar products are published by consumer watchdogs, such as the Consumers’ Association, newspaper and magazines” (Hill and O’ Sullivan, 1996, p.95). Nowadays, besides printed version, customers can find the public information online in the organizations’ webpage or e-newspaper, e-magazines.

Promotional messages: the information is sent from the producers and sellers including advertising messages, sales presentations, labels on packaging and sales literature. It’s mentioned probably as the least credible in the eyes of consumers (Hill and O’ Sullivan, 1996). Associated with technology, these messages are easily found as the form of email, online advertisement on webpage, etc.

### 2.2.3 Evaluation of alternatives

In this stage, customers use different criteria to compare between difference choices. Criteria is ranged from “essential” to “would like” to “marginal benefit” in a hierarchy which help customers make final decision based on the products or services that meet the top criteria of the list (Hill and O’ Sullivan, 1996). In tourism, the potential travelers develop a liking, interest or attitude about the destination area (Mill and Morrison, 2009). Buhalis & O’Connor, 2005 proposed that customers use Meta Search Engines such as Kayak and Kelkoo to check and compare products based on their expectation and requirements. Hill and O’ Sullivan, 1996 argued that in the holistic understanding of this stage, price does not play a key criteria for customers. Low price usually is in “would like” while quality factors such as quality service and reliability often are “essential”. Conversely, recently researches show that customers spend more time in price comparison with the different service options on website. Price is one of seven factors that customers evaluate the travel agencies’ website usefulness (Cho and Agrusa, 2006). Cho and Agrusa (2006) also mentioned that, a lower price is expected by online users rather than in the traditional marketplace. In addition, Hill and O’ Sullivan, 1996 also mentioned that the total product including both tangible and intangible criteria such as credit facilities, installation and after-sales service, brand image and the location and reputation of retailers is considered by customer. In different stages of travel, customers require different information (Choi, Lehto, and
O’Leary, 2007) however, their opinions and preference don’t associate with the websites type they primarily use (Pfaffenberg and Burnett, 2007).

### 2.2.4 Purchase decision

In this stage, consumers decide which product or service they want and make payment for it. There are more and more customers purchase tourism products and services online via websites (Chiang & Jang, 2006). According to Hill and O’ Sullivan (1996), consumers may change to an alternative product than change the supplier. Consumers also can delay or cancel the payment if they find inaccurate information or higher price from the supplier. Moreover, the security of online transaction, personal service, experience and time consuming are considered (Wolfe, Hsu and Kang’s, 2004). In addition, many customers concern about privacy issues which can make them change to buy products and services offline (Kolsaker, Lee-Kelley and Choy, 2004). So it’s obviously that information still play an important role in this stage as it can change customer’s buying decision. However the role is different in different tourist. For example, with more experienced internet Chinese users, online security is more concerned than hotel brand when they book the hotel online (Kim, Ma, & Kim, 2006) while business travelers can pay for comprehensive IT services which meet their need (Yeh, Leong, Blecher, & Lai, 2005). So in order to increase the chance of online buying, it is necessary to investigate different customers’ online behavior (Lee, Qu, & Kim, 2007).

### 2.2.5 Post purchase behavior

After purchasing a product, or in tourism, travelers have returned home, consumers assess how much the product satisfies their meet and expectation. They can share their experience online such as in website Tripadvisor or Holidaycheck.de and blogs as well as rate the quality of the product (Thevenot, 2007). This evaluation will later become internal information search for customer in the next time they have a similar need (Hill and O’ Sullivan, 1996). The higher stage tends to reinforce the lower stage and the satisfying the visitor reinforce each step in the buying process as the customer can repeat the purchase (Mill and Morrison, 2009, p330). The review can be positive or complain and may have an influence to other
potential customer when they search for information. For example, blog is one of the popular review sources from travelers in which they can communicate with each other and to share their authentic experience (Pudliner, 2007) and readers may perceive the destination’s image differently after reading blog’s content (Pan, McLaurin, and Crotts, 2007). Besides, electronic word-Of-Mouth is a tool of customer’s evaluation via websites, chat rooms and consumer forums (Gelb and Sundaram, 2002). Recently, there is the availability of 3D e-tourism environment where tourists can update their diaries and photo albums (Berger, Dittenbach, Denk, Merkl, & Pesenhofer, 2007). However, different data sources—such as blogs, online travel magazines, review sites, travel websites, and official tourism websites target different audiences as their content are collected from various sources (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007).

2.3 Theory part’s conclusion

Chapter 2 has presented the theoretical background of the thesis. The important roles of information technology in tourism as well as its affect in formulating new customers’ characteristics and demands are introduced. New tourists are mentioned as more sophisticated, more flexible and more independent-minded who require better quality, more value for money and greater flexibility in travel experience, more unique, targeted and customize holidays and more environmentally conscious and nature-oriented holiday. Gradually, new travelers require interacting with suppliers to have satisfaction of their own specific needs (Buhalis, 2000). These two first sections provide the basic guidance to understand why new tourists behave differently in making decision.

Further, the information technology has changed and has significant impact on consumers’ behaviors especially in their decision making. Kotler’s five-stage model of tourist’s decision making was introduced. In every stage of the model, it is shown that information technology has involved and influenced consumers in the way of searching and evaluating information before going to make the decision. The higher stage tends to reinforce the lower stage is mentioned (Mill and Morrison, 2009). Kotler’s (1999) decision making process model is a major theory framework to analyze the empirical data later.
3. Methodology

Chapter 3 is divided into five main parts with a purpose of presenting methods as well as the way how the author collect data. Section 3.1 contains a short discussion about qualitative study while 3.2 present the inductive way of approaching to the field. The follow section 3.3 discusses about the whole process of data collection including semi-structered interview and website analyse. Section 3.4 content’s is about data analyse and is followed by conclusion in section 3.5.

3.1 A qualitative study

Methods are tools for researchers to gain results in their research (Smith, 2010). Different researches require different kinds of methodologies to underpin the research work and different methods in order to collect data.

Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining “the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants” (Bryman, 2001: 366). It also means that qualitative research is able to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a certain research issue. It helps researchers to reveal “human’s” information which is often contradictory and complicated behaviours, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships which may leads them to different decisions. As the aim of this study is to see how Couch Surfers use travel information technological applications in planning their trip, qualitative method is used to investigate and study and explain Couch Surfers’ behaviours in their decision making process. Moreover, it is argued that having two different methods for gathering respondents’ words gives more chance for genuine and extensive data collection (Bryman, 2001).

In this thesis, the author employs semi-structure interview and website’s analysis as tools doing the research. The reason why the author choose semi structure interview is its credibility of interviewee’s spontaneous answer. With open questions, semi structure interview allows informants express their ideas freely and explain how, why they have different behaviour in
different stages of decision making. On the other hand, all Couch Surfers need to have an account in Couch Surfing website to be members. All activities of Couch Surfers are updated in the Couch Surfing community website. Thus it is obvious that all Couch Surfers are computer literacy. This fact leads to the reason why the author chooses netnography which allows author to observe and analyse Couch Surfers behaviour on website as a second method. The combination of these two qualitative methods helps the author to have more considerable variability of data which permits higher chances of deriving theoretical relationships as Bryman (2001) declared.

3.2 Inductive approach – approach to the field

Flick (2006) mentioned one potential problem of approaching and contacting with people in the field when doing research. As the author had an account in Couch Surfing website since 2011 but have never been an active member so how to access individuals in the field is concerned. There are many inactive or newcomer members like the author in the Couch Surfing websites so a question is raised “how individual who would provide the most information is found?” Would people willing to share their information? If people are unwilling, it could be a problem for collecting the data. The author entered the field by being a more active couch surfer, experience the first surfing in a Couch Surfer member’s place in Goteborg and attending Couch Surfing’s meeting holding by a Couch Surfer in Copenhagen. The author’s concern was released as couch surfing community shares a common vision of discovering places via meeting and sharing people’s experience which means most of members of Couch Surfing are very friendly and willing to share their opinions. Moreover, some of the author’s friends are also founded as a Couch Surfers via Couch Surfing website. Searching and being more active member in the Couch Surfing website made informant’s more approachable.

3.3 Data collection

One important part of doing research is collecting data. How to collect data and what to do with it will later on dictate how valuable the data is (Silverman D., 2007). In this thesis, semi
structure interview and website’s content analysis are employed. The below sections discuss the advantages and disadvantage of used methods.

3.3.1 Semi-structured, qualitative interviews

3.3.1.1 Semi-structured interview

One of the main types of interview in qualitative research is semi-structured interview (Bryman, 2001). The relatively unstructured nature of the semi-structured interview and its capacity to provide insights into how research participants view the world” as Bryman (2001, p.438) mentioned is important to this research as it helps the author to find the informant’s hided thinking when they make decision in their planning their trip. Moreover, according to Flick (2006), conducting semi-structured interviews can help to express the interviewed subject’s viewpoints more than by using highly-structured interviews or questionnaires. Smith (2010, p. 109) further added that, “a semi-structured interview is more ordered than just an open-ended conversation but not as rigidly scripted as a questionnaire”. Bryman (2001) emphasizes that semi-structured interview can address issues more specific if the author has a clear focus investigation in the beginning. In this thesis, the author has a clear attention in Couch Surfer’s behaviors in using information technological application so in decision making and their awareness of using travel agency’s website so semi-structured interview seems to be a proper tool.

Flick (2006) also points out that informants in the field have subjective theories about the studied topic. This means that the interviewee has a complex stock of knowledge about the topic under study. In order to study this complexion, the flexibility of the semi-structured interview is an advantage. The researcher prepares an interview guide including a list of questions of specific topics but not necessary to follow the outline exactly. Some questions may be added when interviewees give more information. This flexible way allows respondents to have opportunity to answer questions freely (Bryman, 2001).
Ten interviews are conducted and all of them are semi-structured. All interviewees were asked all the questions in similar wording questions but the order of questions are different one by one. “Also the emphasis must be on how the interviewee frames and understands issues and events – that is what the interviewee views as important in explaining and understanding events, patterns, and forms of behavior” (Bryman, 2001 p.438). As interviews in this thesis are to explore the people’s experience, the author wanted our interviewees to have time recalling their experience and think of their own behavior. Therefore, during the interviews, questions were asked in a flexible order in order to not interrupt the interviewees’ thought but still kept track of prepared questions.

As the thesis investigates Couch Surfer’s interaction with travel information technological application in general as well as with those from travel agencies therefore the interview guide was designed covering both some general questions to detail questions (See Appendix 1). General open questions about technological applications such as “what/ which” or “why” do you…? may be answered on the basis knowledge and spontaneous thought that the interviewee has in mind. Additionally theory-driven, hypothesis-directed questions are asked. Questions asking about detail in each stage of decision making are raised in order to make the interviewees implicit knowledge more explicit (Flick, 2006). Furthermore the researcher needs to balance between mentioning topics from the interview guide and being open to the structure, as well as the direction of the conversation, preferred by the interviewee (Flick 2006, p.168). Thus during interviews, the author asked follow up questions such as “why” as well as clarifying question “could you tell me more detail…” to gain more information and the insight thought of interviewees based on the informants’ experience and sensitivity to situations. The author also summarized and asked reconﬁrmed question to make sure there is no misunderstanding between the interviewer and participants and answers are reliable. Moreover, the author is aware to use language that was comprehensible to the interviewees and would not confuse them or persuade their answers in any way (Bryman, 2001).
3.3.1.2 Interview setting

Smith (2010, p113) give an advice to have a reliable data that, “the interview should normally be done in a locale in which the respondent is comfortable”. Thus, most of the interviews were conducted at the interviewees place including two interviewees from Copenhagen, except one from other city but came to Helsingborg for interview in a coffee shop and one via skype. The interview in a coffee shop was conducted in a quite place so the interview went well without any disturbing. In addition, it is necessary to be open and honest with interview’s subjects to ensure confidentiality, establish trust and not come off as judgmental (Keats, 2000) thus before conducting the interview, the author usually spent time to talk with informants a little bit or even hang out as a friend in order to make interviewees have good first impression and feel comfortable to express themselves without any concern (Keats, 2000). Only one interview was taken via email and two via skype due to the time and geography difference. However interview via email and skype also has advantage of making respondent feel comfortable to answer question freely as they don’t have to be nervous or hard feeling as face to face interview and the email interview could give a respondent more time to recall his memory and to add information to answer questions (Smith, 2010).

Every interview is audio-recorded with the permission of the respondents. The background noise was minimized as the author and interviewees chose quiet places to conduct the interview. During interviews, the author also took note important words or respondents’ action in order to easily recall the memory later when transcribing and analyzing. As some of the interviewees prefer not to be mentioned by name, all the respondents’ names are held anonymous. All the interviews last from 40 to 90 minutes.

3.3.1.3 Selection of informants

Flick (2006) suggests that different research questions require different informants. As informant selection plays an important role in doing qualitative research to ensure the data is valid and reliable thus the informant’s samples are selected and can
be adjusted according to the research question formulating process. As my question is about the Couch Surfer’s awareness in using travel information technological application in general as well as in travel agency so the first criteria for informants is they must be a Couch Surfing’s member. In addition, Couch Surfers must be active in the community either with experience in hosting, surfing or attending Couch Surfing’s meeting as now the Couch Surfing community is expanding too fast and some of members just have account in the website but have never acted as a Couch Surfer. In order to meet this requirement, the author looked at informant’s profile as well as reference in his/her account in Couch Surfing website to see how experience s/he is. It is also because choosing knowledgeable informants who can express themselves to be understood by researchers are necessary.

Moreover their willingness to have time to participate in the research is needed (Flick, 2006). Informants who took part in this research are very easy going couch surfers in the dominated age of 20 to 30 in Couch Surfing community. They love to meet people and are willing to share their idea so the communication between the author and the informants went well which hopefully could give reliable information to the research.

Another concern when choosing participants is how to use the answers. Researchers have to reflect upon how to use information and how to analyze it (Flick, 2006). This argument is also related to the reliability and validity of the data. The author has a concern about the diversity of Couch Surfer’s nationality as different nationality and cultures participants may enrich interview’s results. However, all of them has lived and has traveled in Europe recently where Couch Surfing is more popular than other places as the Couch Surfing’s statistic has shown. Most of them have lived in Sweden and Denmark for a while except one is in Ireland, one in Belgium so they have some common concept’s perceiving as Swedes and Danish people. In addition, the thesis is studying about universal explanation of Couch Surfers’ behavior and their interaction with travel information technological application in general but not in a specific country so cross cultures interview is appropriate here. Chosen Couch Surfers are come from different countries with different cultures. Three of informants speak the same mother
tongue language with the author while others speak English well so there was no big obstacle in expressing and understanding each other during the interview.

The breakdown of interviewees based on nationality, recently location and code as below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Code</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedes</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>S1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwanese</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>T1, T2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>V1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>V2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>V3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>V4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3.2 Netnography

In order to investigate how Couch Surfers interact with travel information technological applications, netnography is used as the second method. Netnography which is created from “Inter[net]” and “eth[nography]” is a process of analyzing free behavior of individuals on the Internet in order to understand insights content (Kozinets, 2010). In this thesis, several websites are chosen to be analyzed.

One of the website is Couch Surfing website where all the members all over the world join and interact with each other officially. It represent for the whole Couch Surfing community virtually. Analyzing this website provides information on the symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns of online consumer groups (Kozinets, 2010).

Another website is chosen by following the most popular site mentioned by interviewed Couch Surfers. It’s skyscanner website which provide flight-related information. This website is considered as a new travel-base website. It is studied to see how this tool is match with the customer’s desire. The result can give the supplementary comment to what may have from the interview.

As a method, “netnography” can be faster, simpler, and less expensive than ethnography as well as more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews (Kozinets, 2010). In this study, both Couch Surfing website and skyscanner are easy to access and have reliable information which suitable to netnography method of its naturalistic, immersive, descriptive, multi-method and adaptable (Kozinets, 2010). The reliable information is proved by transparent information in both two website. The Couch Surfing website is only accessed fully with member’s account which means Couch Surfers are verified by several different ways such as vouching, reference from other members, paid verify service, controlled centre mail box (Couch Surfing website, 2012). Moreover since the Couch Surfing community is built base on trust and volunteer in order to share and exchange culture, posted information is controlled not only by administration board but also all other members. The content of skyscanner website is also accurate and positive as the website function is collect and filters contents from other website but not producing it. The more accurate information, the more attractive website is to advertiser.
website owners earn the benefit from advertisement not by adding fee to their services. So in these two cases, the date is valid and reliable. Besides, the author needs to consider graphical visual, audio and audiovisual aspects of online community data when doing the netnographic data analysis as Kozinets (2010) has suggested.

In addition, Kozinets (2010) also argues that “we do both observation and discourse in netnography” in data analysis strategies. It is suggested that the author can observe how people act in their online posting. If consider the website’s content as a document, there are two ways to approach: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative refers to the frequency of word appearance which may relate to words’ significance and enhance reliability and validity of data. However, it is necessary to pay attention on the context which regards of “process, social context and particular circumstances’ author view can supplement the fully document’s understanding in qualitative approach (May, 2001). Keep these thought in mind, the author aware to use both qualitative and quantitative in analyzing website.

3.4 Data analysis

As Bryman’s advice (2001), audio recording device was used in all conducted interviews and later all interviews were transcribed completely in exact words. Transcription allows the author to carry out a more thorough examination of responses since the interviewee’s exact words were recorded rather than having to rely on my memory to take notes. In addition, transcribing interviews were done as they are conducted rather than waiting a long time in order to “be more aware of emerging themes that [you] may want to ask about in a more direct way in later interviews” (Bryman, 2001 p.453).

When starting analysis, the author went through all the sentences in the transcriptions, and noted down all the names of relevant theories next to the sentences which means coded in context (Bryman, 2001). The data was printed, coded and analyzed correspondently with three sub-questions. The author went through the data several times and marked the most important findings to focus on analyzing.
In the first part of analysis, the author focuses on the first sub-question which related to the theory of information technological application in tourism. Couch Surfers were asked questions toward “which information technology do Couch Surfers do when they are planning their trip?”, “which travel information technological applications do they use most frequently?”, “which travel information technological applications that they don’t use or use less?”, “which travel information technological applications are used in each stage of decision making process?”. Moreover, based on the available information in Couch Surfing website which includes the observation of Couch Surfer’s actions in the website, those above questions are answered.

Dealing with the second sub-question about the awareness of Couch Surfer in using travel information technological applications from travel agency, data mostly is collected from interviews. Questions are raised such as: “Do Couch Surfers have attention in using travel agency’s technological application?”, “What kind of travel information do they usually pay attention and use the most in travel agency’s website?”, “which kind of travel information from travel agency are useful for Couch Surfers in planning their trip?”. Combining with an analyzing of a travel agency’s website, the author study to see “how is the interaction between travel agency and Couch Surfers?”, “do Couch Surfers feel excluded from travel agency?” or “are travel agencies ignored by Couch Surfers?”

For the third part of the analysis, concerning after how flexible Couch Surfers are in planning and decision making process, questions are studied as below: “Do Couch Surfers follow five stages of decision making strictly?”, “what factors influence to their decision making?”. In this part, theory about decision making is a background to base on.

3.5 Summary

Chapter three has presented and discussed the process of collecting data. As mentioned in the introduction, the aim of the thesis is to study the interaction between Couch Surfers and technological applications which means their behavior and their reasons are need to be investigated. Thus qualitative methods including semi-structure interview and website’s content analysis are suitable to use. Ten active Couch Surfers are chosen to be interviewed. Their ages
are between 20 to 30 years old - the dominant ages of Couch Surfing community. Informants are chosen on purpose as representatives of Couch Surfer’s tourist segment. However ten is a comparative small number compare with an expanding community. In order to generalize the finding from interviews, the analysis of their official website www.couchsurfing.org gives supplementary confirmations before the author coming to the conclusion. The website is the “place” that activities of the whole Couch Surfing community’s taken part in members is shown. The website reflects honestly the whole Couch Surfing community as its contents is built by Couch Surfers. Thus the combination of these two methods offers the chance to draw conclusions generally despite the bias or limited in small number of informants. Moreover, in order to ensure the quality of the data collected by used qualitative methods, suggestion from Flick (2001) is followed. The data collecting process and considerations are described as clear as possible to create the reliability.
4. Case of Couch Surfer

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an introduction of couch surfing community and the brief overview of couch surfers before going to further research. The first part of the chapter represents history and updated statistic of couch surfing network to see how couch surfing phenomenon has developed. As this is a new phenomenon and the author couldn’t find research studying about it so all the information below is basically extracted from Couch Surfing official site (www.couchsurfing.org). The second part 4.2 indicates the need of Couch Surfer as a “forgotten tourist segment”.

4.1 Introduction of Couch Surfing (CS)

From 2004 to mid 2011, CouchSurfing is a non-profit organization. The CouchSurfing website is ran by CouchSurfing employees themselves and volunteers. Recently, due to the difficulty in government’s funded circumstance and the need of continuing developing network sustainable, CouchSurfing is changed to be a Benefit corporation (B corporation) which is not a traditional for-profit organization but “a new type of corporation which uses the power of business to solve social and environmental problems” (B corporation webpage, 2012). The basic information on the webpage hasn’t changed except some new optional added functions which will be charged. The Couch Surfing board still keeps the information to be easily accessible and transparent from the website. Base on this, CouchSurfing.org is assumed as an acceptable and trustworthy media source for extracting information.

CouchSurfing is the world’s largest social travel network for travelers from all over the world who are willing to share their cultures, hospitality, and authentic experiences. The original idea was from Casey Fenton, in 1999, after finding an inexpensive flight ticket for travelling from Boston to Iceland. Fenton randomly emailed 1,500 students from the University of Iceland, asking them if he could sleep on their couches during his stay in Iceland. He got more than 50 offers in return for free accommodation. Thus the CouchSurfing project was born and has developed until now. Fenton together with colleagues Dan Hoffer, Sebastian Le Tuan and
Leonardo Silvera, launched CouchSurfing as a beta in 2003. The project became a public website in January 2004 and by the end of that year, CouchSurfing International Inc. had over 6,000 members. Today, there are more than four million members of the websites, spreading over 230 countries and territories around the world and has been increasing rapidly. In April 2012, the average number of new users signing up every day is approximately 5700. Couch Surfing’s member has a wide range of age, from 18 to 89 years old with the majority members between 18 (34.8%) to 29 (34.4%). The average age is 28 (CouchSurfing webpage, 2012). Below is a graph representing Couch Surfer’s location (in red dots) around the world which obviously shows that two areas have the most Couch Surfers are the US and the Europe.

**Graph 1. Geographical graph of Couch Surfers’ location (in red dots)**

*Source: CouchSurfing webpage, (Apr, 2012)*
As an American neologism, Couch Surfing dedicates to budget travelling, staying at stranger’s house to another stranger house as a free accommodation. According to the website, every people are welcome to register free of charge to be a members of CouchSurfing website. The participant, called the Couch Surfer, has his/her own profile which provides as much information including their photos as much as possible in order to make others feel comfortable to offer them a couch or to be chosen as a host. There are some safety features such as verifying names and addresses, personal references and “vouching for” a member to make them more reliable and trustworthy Couch Surfers.

Through the website, Couch Surfers can interact with each other by exchanging hospitality, exchanging cultures, sharing travelling experiences and making friends internationally. Two most typical activities in Couch Surfing community are hosting and surfing which indicate as “staying with a local as a guest in their home” (CouchSurfing webpage, 2012). Couch Surfers from all around the world search and find a host in an area they are travelling to, send a request through their account on the CouchSurfing website. If the host accepts the request, Couch Surfers will be offered a free accommodation in the host’s place during the time they are travelling. The CouchSurfing website statistic mentions approximately 4.4 millions successful surfings are recorded until April, 2012. However, CouchSurfing is not simple as getting free accommodation, the community is a place where people can share their “meaningful cross-cultural exchanges and experiences with other members and make connections across oceans, continents and cultures”. It is also suggested that with free service without monetary exchange in Couch Surfing, travelers could be allowed to spend the money they could use for accommodation in another things such as travelling further/more frequently or participating in more activities in a destination. In addition, in the Couch Surfing website, “Activities” is available where members can create events for whom would like to join and meet in local place with local people such as Couch Surfing meeting, one day trips, going out without accommodation require. Couch Surfers can discuss exchange information as well as give advices to others about attractions, things to do, tips when travelling through their experiences. Besides, in the website, it is easy to find Couch Surfing magazine where posted “World Wide Events”, “CouchStories” which can give Couch Surfers suggestions about different place to visit around the world. Follow the CouchSurfing’s vision and mission, its website is designed with all above
contents is seemed to be a very fruitful information source for travelers preparing for their trips which may affects to their decision making.

Vision and Mission Statement (CouchSurfing webpage, 2012)

The CouchSurfing Vision: “A world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections with the people and places they encounter.”

The CouchSurfing Mission Statement: “Create Inspiring Experiences. ‘Inspiring Experiences’ are fun, exciting and accessible experiences that stimulate people to learn and grow. Experiences of this nature encourage people to explore and connect with people and places that are different than what we're accustomed to.”

4.2 Couch surfers’ unique characteristics and needs in travelling

According to the tourist definition of WTO: "visitor staying for more than 24 hours in a country visited for business or leisure purposes", couch surfer definitely is a tourist segment as couch surfers leave their home and spend at least one night free accommodation from other members and mostly for leisure purposes. Thus, as three main components a tourist needs for travelling are: attractions’ information, transportation and accommodation. However, they are seemed to be a forgotten segment for travel agency since they have free place to stay while there is a fact that accommodation is one of a main profitable services of travel agency. There is a fact that with the ability of using internet, they are obviously is a part of “new consumers” in technology era who require for money value, time value and quality value. As a tourist, couch surfer still have their needs in travelling that can be listed as below:

First, all couch surfers need accommodation and most of them desire to have a free one by staying with local Couch Surfer. That’s one of the main reasons attracted many people. In order to find a good host, they need to use the internet to get to know different hosts in their coming area and write a request to them. The couch surfing webpage offer a few safeguards in
place to help members study about each other. Members can leave references about people who have ‘surfed’ on their couch or where they have ‘surfed’ themselves. Member also can base on an added safety feature, verify addresses. This allows other members to see that you really are the person who you say you are.

However, there is another choice for Couch Surfers to exchange culture with local people without staying in their place. Couch Surfers may join local Couch Surfers activities and meeting. Thus Couch Surfers still need to find accommodation by themselves such as hotel, hostel, B&B etc like ordinal tourist.

Secondary, couch surfers need transportation from their home to the host’s places. Their need in transportation is unlimited as couch surfing community don’t have any special offer about transportation. However, couch surfers can be considered as “backpacker-plus” as they share some common with backpackers in the way they travel (The Argentina Independent webpage, 2012).

“... With CouchSurfing the emphasis lies in a personal way of travelling. Backpacking comes close; travelling from hostel to hostel, sitting in a local bus, in a way you do understand the culture of a country a bit better. After all the backpacking hype, CouchSurfing has become hotter, and grows more popular every day. It can be described as ‘backpacking-plus’. You’re still travelling a certain country, but this way you have a real chance to become personally acquainted with locals and learn about their culture” (The Argentina Independent webpage, 2012).

Refer to money value, besides having free accommodation, couch surfers as “new consumers” also look for cheap tickets. Moreover, the main age of couch surfers are under 29 it’s easy to understand that they will have more concern about the economic saving in travelling.
Refer to quality value; couch surfer would like to explore the destination by their own way with more connection with local people via their hosts. It’s one of the other main reasons why they sign up this community.

“When you join Couch Surfing, you tap into our network of welcoming people worldwide. You can share your hospitality and experience your city through new eyes by offering travelers a place to stay on their journey. You can bypass the typical hotel experience by staying at the home of a local and learning about their culture. You can join cool and interesting people for anything from a bike ride to a party using Couch Surfing Activities. And you can meet up with new people, whether at home or while traveling, for inspiring experiences and new friendships.” (Couch Surfing webpage, 2012)

4.3. Summary

The thesis mainly focuses on Couch Surfers as a tourist segment and this chapter has aimed at introducing Couch Surfing community and its members. Couch Surfers have unique characteristic and needs which are different with regular tourists. They have a chance to have free accommodation staying with local people. Moreover, the dominant members are in the age from 18 to 30. The young age people also usually have limit in finance which make Couch Surfers tend to travel in a budget way. The short introduction of the Couch Surfing website will be further analyzed in the analysis chapter to see what information Couch Surfers need and how it is influence to their decision making when they are planning their trip.
5. Couch Surfers and travel information technological applications used in trip planning

In order to analyze how Couch Surfers use information technologies in their trip planning, materials collected from semi-structured in depth interview and website’s content analyses (netnography) are analyzed.

The chapter includes two sections. Section 5.1 shows the most popular travel information technologies which are used by Couch Surfers. Those travel information technologies applications are presented following their most popular in each stage of Kotler’s (1999) decision making model. The section 5.2 discusses information technologies Couch Surfers use less. Via analysis, this chapter also illustrates the Couch Surfers’ characteristic of being more sophisticated, independent and demand more effective and money value product and services which refer to new tourists in technological decade.

5.1. The most popular used travel information technological applications

Buhalis (2008) discussed the changes in the way using Internet of new travelers that they rely heavily on the internet for information searching which includes new organizations like domain –specific search engines and meta-search engines, web 2.0, relative use of information sources. It is proved by the empirical results from Couch Surfers as below.

5.1.1 Consumer need recognition

In this stage, as discussed in the theory part, the most important point is to be aware and recognize which place can fulfill tourists’ physical and psychological needs. Consumers’ awareness can be conscious or unconscious when travel information is transferred to them (Mill and Morrison, 2009). Hence, within the context of popularity of information technologies in general and internet in particular, customers can be received information about their desire place
by looking through search engines, meta search engines, web 2.0 and others tools. For example, search engines help Couch Surfers to define their desired place to go which is match with what tourist need to do in the need recognition stage of Kotler (1999). It either can give Couch Surfer supplement information for place they may know via other tool or suggest you a destination as respondent from Indonesia, Taiwan and Vietnam mentioned:

“Not really in the internet (to find a place to go), maybe in the advertisement and it leads you to the internet. For example you turn on the TV and you see Turkey tourism, flight to Istanbul, and they show you all the nice thing about Turkey and then you are like oh i really want to go there and start searching on the internet, checking the price of the plane, something like that” (I1).

“If I want to travel but I haven’t decided and I have a limited budget, I just check on the cheapest ticket website so I just see what kind of the ticket is cheapest and so im quite interested in that and if it is quite cheap and the country is quite interesting so i will book the ticket” (T1).

For example, in order to recognize his need of finding a place to go for next trip when he has no idea, respondent from Vietnam also bases on web 2.0: “Ah, I take a look on Facebook to see posted photos from place that people had traveled before as well as other’s comments below them. I’m kind of following people, just go to place that have many people visited it before.” (V2).

Obviously, information technologies give Couch Surfers important tools to find sources in defining their travel need. It is consistent with Zin (2007) research about the importance of internet as an information source in the theory part. However, search engines and web 2.0 show their main function in next stages so it will be presented detail in following sections.

5.1.2 Information search
5.1.2.1 Search engines (domain search engine)

All participants in this study mentioned search engines as a must used tool in planning their trip. Google – the domain search engine is mentioned by all of interviewees. Some of them do emphasize the important of Google as: “…very popular” (Swedes respondent) or “the best friend” that V2 “usually rely on” (respondent 2 from Vietnam) and “can answer all your questions” (Respondent 4 from Vietnam). Besides, similar search engines are also listed by C1 “we do have some search engines back in China except Google and some domestic companies but the basic function is the same, just searching engine” or “I will search in searching engine first like google or yahoo” (interview with I1). This finding is consistent with research of Law and Huang (2006) before which mentioned Google is the most popular used searched engine.

From the view of respondents, search engine is used for general purposes that Couch Surfers can search for various topics from air tickets, accommodation or attractions and things to do in a place. It’s a first source that all respondents use to filter to specific sources they want to find certain information. When Couch Surfer was asked about how and why s/he used search engine for, V2 said “I usually type in Google first” and T1 said “I just enter some the key words like cheap tickets and destination so I can find those websites” while F1 “found blog via google” and V3 use “search engine to find and book flight, train, bus ticket”. Thus, it is argued that most of needed information for the trip is found through search engine either directly or indirectly. Combining with the extremely frequently use of search engines, it seems like Couch Surfers rely heavily to search engines in particular as Buhalis (2008) suggested.

The reason of using search engines is it is simple and effective. When describing how to use search engines, all of interviewees response: “type the key words” and some of them emphasized by using “just typed/ entered key words (I1, T1, C1, S1). The “just” word appears in four response together with the way all of them describe the process very fluently without stop for a second show that this is the easy task and that they have been using search engines for many times. Results all interviewed Couch Surfers received from Google and similar search engines are rich which allow them to choose and collect from different sources such as sites of airlines, accommodation, forums, blogs, magazines, travel agency, and official tourism website.
of a certain city / country. I1 said “It’s easy that even you don’t know the website but just put key word and then one second, they will show you websites” while V2 narrated that “the result in number one (from Google) usually links to wikitravel. I will read wikitravel first then look at other results behind it”. One Couch Surfer even shows her interest in Google as the fruitful source: “Google already offers me a lot of information so I don’t need any other sources” (Respondent C1 from China). Through Couch Surfers’ ideas, search engine is mentioned as friendly and customized interfaces which can empower customers to get information of product and services they are interested in. This finding is match with the suggestion of Buhalis (2000) when he shows the development of information technology in order to meet customer satisfaction in the theory framework.

Search engine can be understood as general searching tools like Google and also can be used within a website. Almost every websites nowadays have a searching tool as a small bar with blank space for visitors typing key words to search a specific content within a website. For example in the website of Couch Surfing, it is very obvious to recognize the searching bar with word “Search (blank for typing destination) for (blank for typing different contents like members, activities, groups)” in the centre of website (See photo 1). Search engine in a website has the same function with domain search engine above but in a smaller scale of website which allow users get information faster and more effective. In another hand, it shows that search engines do not only help to improve customers’ satisfaction but also help to improve the quality of service (Poon, 1993). This debate is reasonable because when a supplier’s website apply search engine, their customers can benefit from its convenience and time saving in filtering and finding correct information in short time. In another words, search engines enhance both suppliers’ production and services quality as well as enhance customers’ satisfaction.

Photo 1: Search engine within Couch Surfing website (Source: Couch Surfing website)
Search engines are used more or less in every stages of decision making of Kotler’s (1999) model. For example, there are some statements as below:

“Not really in the internet (to find a place to go), maybe in the advertisement and it leads you to the internet. For example you turn on the TV and you see Turkey tourism, flight to Istanbul, and they show you all the nice thing about Turkey and then you are like oh i really want to go there and start searching on the internet, checking the price of the plane, something like that” (I1).

“If I want to travel but I haven’t decided and I have a limited budget, I just check on the cheapest ticket website so I just see what kind of the ticket is cheapest and so im quite interested in that and if it is quite cheap and the country is quite interesting so i will book the ticket” (T1).

Through I1,T1, it is shown that search engines also help Couch Surfers to find more information that they can compare different choices (information search stage) before going to purchase decision stage if cannot find alternatives or to find a place to share experiences. Moreover as search engines can link Couch Surfers to different sources such as blogs, forums, websites, magazines, travel agencies ect as mentioned above that can have relational information to all steps in decision making process, it confirmed the argument about the most important source of internet from Zins (2007) as well as of search engines from Buhalis (2008).

5.1.2.2 Web 2.0 - Electronic word of mouth (Word of mouse)
Social networking sites, blogs, forums, wikis are very popular used among Couch Surfers. All of informants mentioned blogs, forums, wikis, tripadvisors or similar as their sources for looking for travel information. These sites have a common as they are built based on users’ contribution which means users can share their idea freely to generate site’s content. These sites are representatives of web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). Respondent from Vietnam said “the most useful is the online wiki where everyone can write down thier knowledge” (V3) and another one support this idea and also explain a reason by saying “I usually use tripadviser as it is built based on members’ comments, photos. I think information from this site is very good for reference as experienced traveler will write better than people work in tourism industry” (V2)

This type of web 2.0 seems has been expanded rapidly. Users not only receive the information but also give a hand to contribute to the data by sharing their own experiences as V1 “I joined forum in Couch Surfing website and in tripadvisor. Usually I give advice more often than ask questions.” (V1). This contribution can make the source becoming richer and more reliable and can increase the available data platform globally (Buhalis, 2008)

Information from different type of Web 2.0 can be used in different stages of Kotler’s model (1999) such as in need recognition stage as mentioned before. However, this tool seems to be most useful in the information search stage when most of interviewed Couch Surfers mentioned this source is a reliable source to look at and then make the comparison before going to make the decision. Obviously, Couch Surfers are experience internet users so electronic word of mouth information seems to be very important for them as Kim, Ma, Kim (2006) has argued.

“I usually use wikitravel first then review in tripadvisor… and then look at Couch Surfing’s forums to see if people discuss about cheap place with delicious food to eat, free entrance museum.” (V1)

“I usually used the “tripadviser” to find where to go, how to go and a lots of other travelers commented on that site so you will have the better advice about that’s the one you want” (C1)
Reason for this tool’s popularity is its practical content from experienced people. Sharing ideas in these sites, participants are completely objective and volunteered. This basic function can build trust to readers. Most of Couch Surfers share the common idea about this reason.

“I barely use the company website because since commercial things are pretty like set up so i chose to go to some forums with discussion or public websites for example Wikipedia – a dictionary.” (I1)

“Yes found blog via google. Yes, it’s helpful because it’s traveler who make it so it’s better.” (F1)

And the respondent from Sweden explained very detail as below:

“The website via the search engine, they are honest as they usually have review from other people and they don’t have benefit from what they wrote. So they usually honest, they don’t get paid for what they are writing. They are websites which are made to record the review and the information from different cities people are travelling. Those websites ought to be truthful because they have the audience via their honesty. Once they have higher visitor, spectator go to the website and they can have higher number of advertisement for the website so they keep honesty….Usually people who wrote the review are travelers. They must be and some are people from that city because they think the review are usually about the general stuff and public places for example like Helsingborg catsle, HBG beach, nobody own it so it like nobody leave the review with intention so they are honest. Honest review it could be helpful.” (S1)

In another words, the main reason for using this tool is the benefits that users can earn (Lopez, 2010). Benefits could be functional and psychological like trust or “immerse themselves in writer’s experiences” (Pudliner, 2007), social like interacting, exchanging ideas, commenting to each other’s ideas, experiences. These sites has become huge data source since people are free to add what they have been through without paying any fee but simple account registration
sometimes so every readers can be contributors and vice versa. It also means helping customer to exchange product information (Lee, Park and Han, 2008) which can make the intangible tourism product be more visible. This fact makes the source expanding rapidly. However, people’s ideas are different base on different context so it is necessary to consider its reliability. Ideas also can be contradictory. It could lead to another work for readers that they need to filter and choose which information they want and agree with as well as could lead to the different levels of Couch Surfers’ participation on these websites 2.0 (Lopez, 2010). Information control need to be considered as this source is unlimited expanding. However, this extra job for Couch Surfers could relate to the reason why information technology development has changed tourists characteristics. They becomes more sophisticated consumers after dealing with lots of information sources to find the most suitable for them in both quality and money value as Poon (1993) and Cheyne, Downes and Legg (2006) has studied.

5.1.3 New Internet-based travel intermediaries (Fare aggregators and meta-search engine) in evaluation of alternative stage

Another popular source that Couch Surfers use for planning their trip is fare aggregator and meta-search engine. This is a travel intermediary site which allows filtering results in a specific theme such as air ticket or accommodation and comparing service’s price at the same time. None of interviewed Couch Surfers ignore this tool, they call them in a simple way: compared price website. Eight of ten Couch Surfers mentioned skyscanner site for finding flight ticket as a specific source they use in every trip’s planning process. One Couch Surfer mentioned another one: kayak and the other one is edream but with the same function as skyscanner. For accommodation, Couch Surfer usually uses hostel.com or hotelbooking.com for searching and making reservation. In order to look closer to this tool, the skyscanner site is chosen to be analyzed to see its advantages.
As argued by Buhalis and O’Connor (2005), customers use meta search engines to check and compare products based on their expectation and requirement. It could be one of the reasons that make meta-search engines popular. Moreover is easy to use by entering key words and the result is customer oriented. Informant from Indonesia response the question of how to find a flight ticket: “I will check the website called skyscanner. It’s about comparing tickets price for flights. Then you choose for example from Copenhagen to everywhere, all destinations and they will give you the cheaper country with the cheaper flights” (I1). “I just type the destination and just find it and see if the price is high or low … check the ability. I think it is very easy. Skyscanner is very good” (T2).

Couch Surfers use meta-search engines more in information search and evaluation of alternatives stage. Meta-search engine not only compare in price but also in some other criteria such as timeline, customer’s ranking, location, brand. ”They compare all the timeline and all the different airlines so it’s very convenient” T2 said. It seems like this type of website meet the Couch Surfer’s information need and also affect to their decision making as respondent from Vietnam mentioned: “I check compared price website which can compare price in different date. I always put price in priority. I choose the date with the cheapest price. I usually use compare price website first because it’s easier and I can check the price for the whole month” (V4). Users can customize the result appearance base on their priority which can help them save time in collecting and make the comparison by themselves “For example if i want to book the hotel, maybe i found the hotel on the cheapest ticket website. Usually i found that and then i found how the traveler comment about that and i will try to look at several comment from the traveler and i will consider if i want to book this hotel” (T1). The convenience is proved by respondent from Sweden “But if you go directly to the airline website of course they don’t compare price with other airlines, they only have their own airlines’ prices. But there are website provide a comparison between all airlines website. Compare website is better”. Moreover, together with customer’s own priority, they can appoint criteria like price, date, brand ect to range from essential to would like to marginal benefit as Hill and O’ Sullivan (1996) suggested. Then customers can adjust the result appearance base on their priority. These functions of website probably are designed to meet new tourist’s characteristics: more flexible and independent-
minded as Poon (1993) mentioned as customers can have more information and enjoys greater choice (Buhalis, 2000)

Take a look on website www.skyscanner.com, it’s designed quite clear and simple which allows users search and compare in flight tickets, hotels and car renting. Once entering the site, it requests visitor to choose language, place they are living as well as currency they use. Then, flight searching will be appeared with area that visitor can enter their own date and destination, number of people for customized search. Besides, there is a list of cheap available flight from visitor’s place as suggestions below the searching area. The order of putting information in this site seems following Buhalis’ (2000) discussion about IT developments enhancing customer satisfactions as in theory part which include user-friendly and customized interfaces. After filling seven blank in searching area, the results will be listed giving customer more information, greater choice with flexible price and can be customized. Users can choose to sort result in comparison of price, time, and airlines and are free to choose to read more detail about flights.

In addition, according to Skyscanner website, in “About Skyscanner” section, it mentions:

“Skyscanner is a travel search site that helps thousands of people find the cheapest flights every day.

We provide instant comparison on flight prices for over 1000 airlines and millions of routes, as well as price comparison for car hire, hotels and holidays.”

There is a notion here that even Skyscanner provides price comparison of flights, car hire, hotels and holidays but it’s considered as a place to find cheapest flight ticket only. The respondents from Sweden also mentioned that “No, I don’t look at other information beside airticket. There is nothing there. Is there any other information? A little bit, maybe sometimes (information about places). No I don’t think so because some destination they have such a data but they just keep the information. It’s irrelevant to their job (in cheap airlines ticket website)” while others said they find information about accommodation in another sites such as hostel.com with the same function with skyscanner. It seems like users in general as well as Couch Surfers use individual site for a very specific purpose.
Another reason that Skyscanner can attract Couch Surfers is “Skyscanner’s flexible search options mean you can browse prices across a whole month, or even a year, allowing you to get the best deals. You book direct with the airline or travel agent, so you get the lowest price with no added commission” (Skyscanner webpage, 2012). Couch Surfer from Taiwan (T2), Vietnam (V1), and Indonesia (I1) confirmed this reason. So this reason is opposite with Hill and O’ Sullivan (1996) in the less importance of price. Couch Surfers seems to spend more time to compare price on website (even looking price through months and year) which is consistent with Cho and Agrusa (2006) argument.

5.1.4 Online reservation and payment system in purchase decision stage

When come to purchase decision stage, similar with Chiang and Jang (2006) finding about the increasing popular of online payment, all respondents have used online reservation and payment online. It becomes very popular now that respondent from Vietnam said “100% online” (V2) and when coming to question “Do you usually buy services online or offline?” (Interview guide) respondent from Indonesia and Taiwan asked the author again “how to buy offline? “(I1, T2) and I1 also mentioned “It doesn’t make sense.” When the author give an assumption question “If there is a small different in price but one you can buy online but a little bit more expensive and one you have to go to the office/ sales spot to buy service, which one do you will choose?” (Interview guide), nine respondents chose online payment immediately first while respondent from Sweden say it depends on the distance but still consider to buy online: “If it’s close i will walk but if it’s faraway i will buy online as if it’s far, I have to buy ticket to go there and energy and I don’t think it worth it” (S1).

The reason all Couch Surfer choosing online method as it’s convenient and time saving: “Prefer online as time is money. I don’t want to go down town and talk with people in Swedish which i’m not good at and i have to work now” (T2). However T2 also said “If it’s more than 200 sek I would go but not under 100”. Here, both Couch Surfer from Sweden and Taiwan consider the price factor and evaluate the price and the convenience in order to choose the best choice. In addition, Couch Surfer from Taiwan (T2) and Vietnam (V2) also show their concern about security of online payment: “I think I have bought too much stuff online even I know it’s risky but I’m used to it and i feel secured when I used digital pad I think it’s safer. In that sense,
it’s a little bit secured” (T2). Thus, even Kolsaker, Lee-Kelley and Choy (2004) argue that privacy issues can make customer change the method of payment from online to offline but it doesn’t seem match much with experienced internet user or online buyers like T2. In addition, eight others Couch Surfers do not mention much their concern about security of online payment. Combine all above explanations, it is shown that Couch Surfers are experienced online buyer who are flexible and demand more value for money which also mean they are part of new consumers with new demands (Poon, 1993).

5.1.5 Post purchase behavior

In post purchase stage, web 2.0 seems to be the most popular tool to share Couch Surfer’s experience. “I joined forum in Couch Surfing website and in tripadvisor. Usually I give advice more often than ask questions.” (V1). As V1 mentioned above she give her comment on forums such as tripsadvisor or forum in Couch Surfing so Web 2.0 is obviously is a place where Couch Surfers shared their experience after travelling in a post purchase stage. Thevenot (2007) proved that travelers can share their experience, rates, quality of product online like tripadvisor website or blog. However, except V1, other couch surfers don’t spend much time in writing blog or attending forums. Thus in this research, Couch Surfers don’t take many actions after purchasing and spending services.

5. 2. The less popular used travel information technological applications

From empirical results through interviewing Couch Surfers, the author has noticed that Couch Surfers are independent and flexible. During the decision making process, all interviewed Couch Surfers search information, make reservation as well as make payment with individual services not package. Answer to the question “Have you ever bought any package from travel agency?” all respondents answered no if they travel as a Couch Surfer. Some did when they travel with friends or family without using Couch Surfing. The package here is understood including at least flight tickets and accommodation. So it can be said that the **package tailor made system** is the less popular used travel information technological applications for Couch Surfers.
One of the reasons is found easily that there is a chance for Couch Surfer to have free accommodation from other local Couch Surfer where they are travelling to. Surfing and hosting is the main activity in Couch Surfing community. However, it doesn’t mean that they don’t use accommodation reservation system as that chance is not always 100%. Couch Surfers still search and reserve accommodation but that is only their back up plan and they can cancel the booking if they can find a host. Respondent from Vietnam explained as below when she was asked if she still kept the plan to go to a place that she can’t find host (Interview guide):

“I still go as when planning, I still search for accommodation fee and I usually book in advance. There are some websites allowing cancellation without fee or with a small fee. I have to get rid of risk by accommodation booking incase I can’t find a host. Even I’m quite confident that I’m very lucky and usually have host but it’s not for sure all the time especially sometimes, I only knew I had host just one or two days before arrival days.” (V1)

Besides, some beginner Couch Surfers who are new in the community and still search and book accommodation when travelling, for example Couch Surfer from France, they have another reason not to buy packages: “Yes, I know they have package of flight and accommodation but I want to chose myself and I don’t think you can find youth hostel in travel agency. I think they have hotel that something expensive and I look for something cheap so…”(F1). There are two reasons can be found here. The first one is as an independent-minded traveler; Couch Surfers don’t want to be depended on a set up package supplied by travel agency. Secondly, even in travel agency, they have tailor made package system, Couch Surfer still don’t use it as the high price is their consideration. In short, Couch Surfers want to design a package freely themselves which can meet their expectation but in a good price which refers to the new tourist’s demands (Poon, 1993).

5.3. Summary

It is hard to say which travel information technological application is the most important for Couch Surfers but through this chapter, it can be seen that search engine, compared price
software (new travel base intermediaries), electronic word of mouth tools (web 2.0) and online reservation system are most popular used among Couch Surfers. The reason of the popularity of those travel information technologies is they are easy to use and effective which allow Couch Surfers access multiple information at the same times. Moreover, it is free and give Couch Surfers authentic experiences. While search engines are usually used in the first step to find general information, new travel base intermediaries with meta search engine help Couch Surfers to filter more specific information such as flight tickets or accommodation. Web 2.0 where users are also website’s content builder is understood as electronic word of mouth source for Couch Surfers looking for authentic information. Last but not least, online reservation and payment systems are popular as its convenience, time saving. The main function of these information technological applications is to help Couch Surfers visualize and assessment places, services as much comprehensive as possible.

All of most popular information technology applications above are used more or less in every stages of Kotler’s model (1999) of decision making process. However, search engines, web 2.0 are more used in information search stage, meta search engines are most popular in evaluating alternatives stage and online reservation and payment system are used in purchase decision.

The less used technological applications for Couch Surfer is package tailor made system which includes accommodation. One easy understandable reason is as the nature of Couch Surfer who would like to stay in a local Couch Surfer’s place for free and exchange culture with their host. However, for new Couch Surfers who still have more interest in paid accommodation, they tend to find their accommodation by themselves rather than using packages. The reason seems more related to financial reason. They prefer to find information, compare price and pay directly to the accommodation supplier rather than pay fee for intermediaries for packages. This refers to the independent of customers within the development and empower of information technology which make packages less used (Buhalis, 2000).

All of Couch Surfers’s technological applications choice shows that Couch Surfers represent characteristics of “new tourists”: more sophisticated and independent and demand
more effective and money value product and services. They are enjoy finding, comparing information and making decision process in order to pay the least money and receive the best services by prefer to go direct to services’ suppliers but not via intermediaries. However they do buy services through intermediaries if they find the “best deal” in price but normally without noticing the intermediaries’ name. Their less loyalty is affected by the development of technology (Poon, 1993).
6. Couch Surfers – flexible tourists

This chapter discusses the difference of using information technology when Couch Surfer plans their trip as a member of Couch Surfing community and when they travel as a regular tourists. Section 6.1 investigates the fact of Couch Surfer’s attention in using travel agency’s technology applications in different stages in decision making process from Kotler et al (1999). Couch Surfers can change easily from feeling being excluded in travel agencies’ technology applications such as website, to don’t have intention to used unintended and tend to use. They are flexible in using travel agency’s website in different cases. Section 6.2 discusses how flexible the Couch Surfer is in decision making’s process. Materials from in-depth interview and website’s content analysis are used.

6.1 Couch Surfer’s awareness of using travel agency’s information technology applications

Base on the response from Couch Surfers, the travel information technology applications from travel agency mentioned in this section mainly regards to travel agency website including online reservation and payment and travel agency’s facebook page.

6.1.1 Need recognition

When Couch Surfers are asked about their intention of looking at travel agency website for defining their need of next destination to visit, most of them said that they always have place to go. Most of them mentioned that their need recognition is defined when they talked with friends, surf on the internet or through media but not travel agency. Only one respondent from China have clear intention to use travel agency website to find suggestion for next destination to go: “Yeah as they are professional, they are the travel agency so they cover almost everything, every place you want to go” (C1). From this response the reason of using travel agency website is reveal as their professionalism function. However, as all response mention they use internet for searching and one of the most popular tool they use in every stage is search engine as above
finding, it is logic to argue that Couch Surfer may use travel agency’s website unintended. These findings confirm the argument of Zins, (2007) about the important of internet in this stage and also illustrate that Couch Surfers don’t pay attention at the website type when they search through the internet (Pfaffenberg and Burnett, 2007).

6.1.2 Information search

When searching the information, different Couch Surfers have different opinions in using travel agency’s website as a useful tool.

Some Couch Surfers found information from travel agency’s website doesn’t help them much. Swedes Couch Surfers said: “No, they (travel agency’s websites) don’t have any other information that is helpful for me except the information about the airlines name and date and price. I felt they are very active in American but not very much here” (S1). The last sentence “I felt they are very active in American but not very much here” can be interpreted that mentioned travel agency seems give more useful information that he may need in the US more than here and make him sounds like be a little disappointed. In short, since travel agencies don’t have suitable information, they do give Couch Surfer the feeling of being excluded. From this response the author aware the lack of filter functions of travel agency website. Even Couch Surfer can find some information but it is not enough for them. The high demand of services’ value (Poon, 1993) of Couch Surfer is revealed.

With high demands, some Couch Surfers ignore using travel agency’s technology applications. One reason was found is the nature of Couch Surfing community. “Since I know that I joined the Couch Surfing, so it’s kind of it’s not a really a big deal because once I have decided to go to this place, specific city, then I just going to Couch Surfing, I will check which Couch Surfers who live there, so I don’t really pay attention on the company or the tourism company or travel agency. Let put in a word: I don’t really care because I have Couch Surfing community”, the Indonesian Couch Surfer (I1) said. From this aspect, Couch Surfers seem to be sophisticated and experience travelers (Poon, 1993). However, Couch Surfer seem to be loyal in using Couch Surfing website which is opposite with the argument of Cheyne, Downes and Legg (2006) about less loyal customer behavior changed by information technology.
Indeed, comparing with Couch Surfing website; it’s easy to find the difference between Couch Surfing’s and travel agencies’ websites in both design and content. Most of all related travel information can be found in Couch Surfing website. There is a “Community Magazine”, “Activities” which allow Couch Surfers access to updated activities around the world including festivals, events which can give Couch Surfers suggestion of place to go. Blogs also are available where Couch Surfers can find travel’s inspiration from fellows. Moreover, as “Group discussion online” is one of four main themes in the website, members can asked and find all related questions, answers they need (information search and evaluate alternative, purchase and post purchase). The most important transactions in the website are finding host and Couch Surfers which mean accommodation. Thus basically Couch Surfing website is a huge data base (web 2.0) that members can use in planning their trip and can be used in all stages in their decision making process following Kotler’s model (1999). However, as most of Couch Surfing website’s content is built based on members’ contribution, the reliable and valuable information need to be considered even the website has some tools to verify its members.

In addition, taking a short test by search engine in Couch Surfing website with key word “hotel” or “accommodation” or “attraction” or “flight” in the result, there are thousands of post and members have been followed up forums discuss about these key words. In contrast, after entering key word “travel agency” there is only 14 lines in results, with less than a thousand members and less than a thousand posts. Picking up one discussion of “STA travel” which is obviously is a travel agency, there are only three members in the group and no discussion, post neither reply. The few result supplemented the finding above about the ignorance in using travel agency’s website as their tool to find information. The screen photos as below:

Photo 3.1: Couch Surfing’s intention of using travel agency 1.
**Photo 3.2: Couch Surfing’s intention of using travel agency 2**

*Source: Couch Surfing website, (May 8, 2012)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Mem</th>
<th>Grps</th>
<th>Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greenland</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BUSINESS CORNER!</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday trips in Estonia</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning to visit Egypt?</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STA Travel</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking in Vancouver</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>searching people to travel with in vietnam o bali</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VISA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visa, Registration and Similar Problems</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFRO TOURS PARTNERS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean Enviroment Earth</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism in Lithuania</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couch in Leticia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ExpatExplore</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
By comparing with Couch Surfing website, the Couch Surfer has high aware in using web 2.0 where members can exchange information (Lee, Park and Han, 2008) while travel agency’s website don’t have or don’t pay attention in this function. Moreover, an argument about the common in age and sharing Couch Surfing vision may lead Couch Surfers in using travel agency’s website less. Couch Surfers have their own lifestyle so they demand different information with other group of travel agency (Kim, Lehto and Morrison, 2007, Hallab and Gursoy, 2006) while travel agency’s website provide general information for all groups.

Besides, some Couch Surfers realize that they visit travel agency’s website unintended. Couch Surfer from Indonesia feels she can use information from travel agency’s website: “Yeah, I believe I read blogger/comment from travel agency ….Ya (it’s helpful)” (I1). However, she just consider travel agency as a free information source that nothing special and she come to it via search engine without intention when she continued: “I think every information which is new for me, even if it’s from travel agency or from blogger or from official website of the country, any new information I will consider it as an useful one… when I’m looking for the information
then I’m there but I don’t really pay attention or care is it travel agency or not, I just check the information” (I1). In addition, the reason was explained from French Couch Surfer “Yes, when I go to Google I can find some travel agency with information about places but it’s not the most important website I need. I just look for the information; don’t tend to go to travel agency website”. In another way of expression, Taiwanese Couch Surfer mentioned “it’s about the ticket cuzz I don’t really care what they say, I don’t really look information from travel agency” (T2). These informants could be a great evident to see the characteristics of new tourists which refer to result oriented and less loyal customers (Poon, 1993). Thank to the developed technology especially search engines and meta search engines, internet users may visit travel agency’s website. If search engines give different results in different searching time (with the same key words), the chance to be visited of travel agency is varied as users such as Couch Surfers don’t intend to access their website if it is not found in search engines results. From this part of discussion, the author aware that Couch Surfers are flexible in using different sources for information. They are independent minded and don’t rely in a specific websites but rather in content (Poon, 1993). Moreover, they are considering using free, convenient available information as Yeoman and McMahon-Beattue (2006) suggested. The effort of being an approachable travel agency for Couch Surfers and customers who use search engines is also revealed. Buhalis (2000) suggestion about information technology development application in order to have more visitors can be applied. For example, as search engines are popular tools used by Couch Surfers, travel agencies need to have a technique and strategy to be appeared in first lines of searching results.

On the other hand, Couch Surfers do intend to use travel agency as a useful information source. However it depends on type of their needs as different people gender, age, nationality, and lifestyle customer search for different information (Kim, Lehto and Morrison, 2007). Travel agency can be a place where Couch Surfer can find suggestion of the next destination to go. Their professional function is recognized by Couch Surfer from Vietnam who think they are good at itinerary arranging with attractions and time: “Before going to a certain place, I usually take a look on a TA’s tour to see how they arrange time to visit attractions as usually those are must see attractions.” (V2). Another respondent has the same explanation: “First, I look for the tourist spots in the destination to see if it’s worth going there, then I find information about
transportation to get in and get around the place” (V3). These searching can help Couch Surfer spend less time in choosing tourism product (Cheyne, Downes and Legg, 2006) which also refer them as sophisticated consumers (Poon, 1993)

6.1.3 Evaluation alternatives

In the stage that comparison is the most popular activities, the most obvious case to see Couch Surfer’s attention is when their information need is more complicated than casual trip. It relates to the intensive information that only expert like travel agency can do as Indonesian Couch Surfer mentioned: “In some places you lack of information, and I think in that situation, using travel agency is safer” (I1) or Vietnamese respondent who has spent money in travel agency before: “because the destination was not a good place for travel alone” (V3). The reason that Couch Surfers intended to use travel agency is probably secured travel. It either can be safer as “If you go with travel agency, you will know which place you should visit, the information about hotel, how to get there ect” (I1) or long haul flight’s safe and guaranteed information as “it takes like 17 hours or more so I should take this more seriously” (T1). This reason relates directly with the familiarity of consumers with the holiday destination (Cheyne, Downes and Legg, 2006).

Another concerned reason is comparative price of travel agency offer. At least three Couch Surfers mentioned directly to price issue by paying attention in last minutes offers from travel agency. “Only sista minute for me from travel agency is useful for me” T2 said while respondent from Sweden explain the convenience reason:” Because it’s cheap, it’s organized not so much tension. You go to the airport, go to your hotel and enjoy your breakfast and come back” (S1). There is another reason found here that once using Travel Agency’s package, buyers save time by skipping some part of information searching and having a good quality time as things are arranged. Chinese respondent also shares the common: “they can offer you very low the organized trip but they can’t do it in a budget way” (C1). From all Couch Surfers responses above, the author is aware that they are trying to compare between different choices to choose the best. It seems that Couch Surfers spend lots of time in price evaluation (Cho and Agrusa, 2006). Moreover, Couch Surfers impressed travel in a budget way and always mention price in
their consideration, price is a key criteria. This finding is opposite with argument of Hill and O’Sullivan (1996).

Interestingly, a notion was found here that when Couch Surfers describe situations they would like to use travel agency as an useful source, it seems like they ignore free accommodation they can have from Couch Surfing. In most of those case, they can be not considered as Couch Surfer as one of them mentioned they might not be able to find any Couch Surfers or not willing to use Couch Surfing in hard places where they “lack of information such as Afghanistan” (I1) or when they “travel with friends, family” (T2) or with “relaxing purpose” and don’t want to spend time in planning a trip (S1, V2). It can be said they are ordinary tourist at that time. Thus, it can be said Couch Surfers reflect ordinary tourists in some cases. They are flexible to change and switch easily from travelling with free accommodation or not. Hence, Couch Surfers hold new tourist characteristic of flexibility (Poon, 1993) and demand convenient information (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattue, 2006)

However, besides above advantages, travel agency and its website also have some disadvantages that Couch Surfers don’t have intend to use. The most popular reason is their nature of doing business which makes Couch Surfer feel hard to trust them as it related to commercial quality.

“No, (don’t check information in travel agency websites). They are not very helpful because they put information they like, not very honest... sometimes some exaggeration which i cant trust (S1).

…” cos travel agency has interest behind selling this. Of course they will have some bias so i wont take this information input (T2).

Thus, Couch Surfers believe that information from travel agency is not objective and it seems like they are not willing to buy services from travel agency as they want to avoid being overcharged: “I book straight with the airline because if you book with travel agency it’s in a sense that you will book with accommodation. Since i use the CS so i don’t need that facility so i just go straight to the airlines website” (I1). This argument dedicates to the sophisticated characteristic (Poon, 1996) of Couch Surfers. Going through more responses, quality information
is only an excuse while high price with good quality services seems to be a main reason that they don’t use travel agency. They have willing to use it when they have more money.

“No, I haven’t bought package from travel agency. I think I will be overcharged. I know travel agency has contract with resort so they will have good deal but here everything is too expensive. If I have more money I will buy services from travel agency to relax”. (V2)

Supplementing to this point of argument, several Couch Surfers consider them as a “budget traveler/ back packer” so they need to save money (C1, V2, I3). It’s kind of nature of Couch Surfers as mentioned in CS website, they try to travel in a budget way. In addition, with the most popular age from 19 to 29 (CS website), they are quite young and would have financial limit which also make them more eager to save money. It also illustrates that price is one of the factors that Couch Surfer evaluate travel agency’s website (Cho and Agrusa, 2006)

One more reason that Couch Surfer say “no” to travel agency is their expectation in spending money. The Couch Surfer from Taiwan who called travel agency is a trap that search engine linked her to, she kept complain about the changed service she had consumed from travel agency.

“But they changed the time without my agreement. After confirmation they let me know that departure time is changed. Even timing is better. I think they just realized that they don’t have available seat so they have to move me to later one. It was better for me but i didn’t expect it” (T2)

Even she got the better quality service (better timing for flight) and that is the cheapest price at the moment she got but the consistent in services’ quality commitment still made her unsatisfied and complained to the travel agency. In this case, the quality commitment seems to be they key point. It also shows that Couch Surfers is very much concern about the services’ warranty. Other Couch Surfer such as C1 and V2 shared the idea of the clearance in information s/he expected in an ideal services from travel agency. V2 said:
“Travel agency can give lots of information about destination or a blog they have or may collect from other sites. If it has lots of information, I will visit it more frequently. In case it simply posts tours but not description about attractions, it is not attractive enough. In short, travel agency should have various tours with competitive price. Tour need to be described in detail and mentioned which includes, excludes. The more detail about company’s responsible they have in tour description, the more professional company is and customer will be more attracted.”(V2).

Couch Surfer’s concern about service quality and warranty shows that they have high demand in consideration with price and convenience in making decision. This finding also presents Couch Surfer’s characteristics of being more sophisticated customers (Poon, 1993).

6.1.4 Purchase decision

There are some responses mention Couch Surfers’ unintended visits to travel agency website to make payment. All the payment are online (Chiang and Jang, 2006). With Couch Surfer who has bought a flight ticket from travel agency via meta search engine, she didn’t look at other part of that travel agency after finishing payment. So she went to travel agency just by chance and also don’t have desire to find if there is any other useful information from travel agency website. “When I booked ticket via skyscanner, it only linked me to the flight reservation and payment part of travel agency. So after filling out information and paying, it’s finish.” (V1). The respondent from Taiwan has showed her strong opinion of unintended using travel agency’s website: “Skyscanner linked me to.. travel agency website. Yes, this is a trap” (T2). T2 only realized that she use travel agency after she bought and used the service already. These responses show Couch Surfers’ opinion and preference when doing the purchase decision doesn’t associate with the websites type they primarily use (Pfaffenberg and Burnett, 2007).

Besides, there is a case that respondent from Sweden changed his purchase decision with travel agency website. “One time I found a ticket flight from travel agency website but I didn’t buy because it was too complicated. It required me to register and fill too much information so I just changed to buy directly from the airline’ website” (S1). This Couch Surfer behavior shows
that Couch Surfers are very flexible, even when they find a good service, they still can change to a better one. Hill and O’Sullivan (1996) have found that consumers may change to and alternative product than change the supplier but this is not so appropriate with Couch Surfers. Couch Surfers seem to change to other more convenient suppliers.

6.1.5 Post purchase behavior

Among 10 respondents, only the Couch Surfer from Taiwan visit travel agency’s facebook after finish using tickets she bought from the travel agency. Interestingly, she visited because she want to complain “I just went to facebook page of travel agency that I bought ticket but they change my flight time to complaint” (T2). From this situation, it could lead to the fact that Couch Surfer will not repeat her purchase with the travel agency since the last stage has not reinforced the lower stage and made her satisfy as Mill and Morrison (2009) argument.

6.1.6 Couch Surfers’ suggestions for travel agency website

Going through respondents’ answers and analysis above, Couch Surfers also give some suggestion to travel agency’s technology applications. The Vietnamese Couch Surfer who lives in Belgium felt excluded by local travel agencies as “In Belgium, most of local travel agencies are only available in Dutch or French so I don’t understand anything. If I use Google translate, it will take too much time. If they have in English, I would like to see what they have. I will give Belgium’s travel a priority as I live here”. (V2). This situation could happen in different countries where English is not the native language while English is the dominant language spoken by Couch Surfer all over the world (Couch Surfing website). Thus suggestion of Buhalis (2000) about the development of interfaces and automatic translation to reduce language barrier can help to serve all target markets.

Another Vietnamese feels being excluded by another reason: “And I have a feeling that travel agency’s information is only for commercial purpose thus nothing can guarantee that their information is suitable for me. For example, they said one hotel has a great deal but for me, the
price is still too high so I have to find information in another sources.” (V1). From this point of view, it’s obvious that Couch Surfer checks the information from travel agency but as its information is not always meet their need so they feel being excluded and have to find substitute sources. Thus the suggestion of having better understanding of consumer needs based on research interaction and data mining as well as provide customers more sophisticated information and greater choice also needed (Buhalis, 2000)

In addition, another Couch Surfer gave a suggestion for travel agency’s website as below

“Travel agency can give lots of information about destination or a blog they have or may collect from other sites. If it has lots of information, I will visit it more frequently. In case it simply post tours but not description about attractions, it is not attractive enough. In short, travel agency should have various tours with competitive price. Tour need to be described in detail and mentioned which includes, excludes. The more detail about company’s responsible they have in tour description, the more professional company is and customer will be more attracted.”(V2).

This suggestion fit with the Buhalis (2000) study which mentions the attention in price and empowering consumers to get information on product and services they are interested in.

Moreover, travel agency also can cooperate with Couch Surfing website to have advertisement to attract Couch Surfers as Couch Surfing is a huge word of mouth channel for them. In another hand, since search engine is one of the most popular tool used by Couch Surfers, it is suggested to apply some technique to push travel agency to first lines in search engines such as search engines optimization (SEO).

6.2 Flexibility in decision making process.

Couch Surfers are very flexible. During decision making process, it is hard to see clearly five stages as they did multiple jobs at the same time. For example, through meta search engines such as skyscanner website, Couch Surfers can use found information for three stages in one time. The time between choosing and consuming a tourism product seems to be shorter and customers
are less loyal (Cheyne, Downes and Legg, 2006). The main function of the skyscanner website is to collect and compare price between different airlines. In this website, Couch Surfers can find information such as time, brand, price then compare, evaluate alternatives based on different factors and define the place to go as V2, I1, S1 did mentioned in the interview. Basically look at this practical process, Couch Surfers seem do not follow stage by stage like Kotler’s theory. They have changed orders in Kotler’s decision making process (1999) which identifying need now is moved after searching information and evaluating alternatives.

Moreover in each stage, Couch Surfers also very flexible and consider the balance between time, quality and price of services. With most of them price is very important, can be the most one for V2 but they always mentioned their consideration of another factors around.

“I’m quite an easy person so I just make it easy. If i haven’t been to the place, and i just want to go there and i’m sure there will have some attraction in the places because every country offer their own and it’s quite typical, you cannot see in another place. It’s always different from one country offer to another. (I1)

“I think being able to go to a new land is happiness. Each place has its own beauty, history and happiness is travelling and experience…Usually I choose famous tourist place. I look at my free time, search cheap tickets to those places and chose one to go.” (V2)

All the rest Couch Surfers share the same consideration in various factors like time, price and their own experience. Even Couch Surfers admit themselves as easy people; they actually represent their own demands in a good combination product of different factors. Their sophistication, flexibility and demands are shown. As they are flexible, they don’t rely on only one source but “try to find as much information as possible” through different sources (I1), “going directly to find, book and purchase” in supplier’s website such as cheap tickets airlines like Ryan airs, Norwegian, easyjet (all Couch Surfers). They also require simple and less time consuming in process as the Couch Surfer from Sweden changed to book ticket in another website as the previous one “is too complicated with account registration” (S1). In another words, they are less loyal to a certain supplier as they depend heavily to search engines (Buhalis,
2008) as well as acting as their own travel agent and build a personalized travel package (Werthner and Ricci, 2004).

6.3 Summary

This chapter shows how flexible Couch Surfers are in using travel information technologies including those from travel agencies in decision making process. Couch Surfers can change easily from feel being excluded to don’t use or used unintended through search engine or intend to use travel agency’s website. The most flexible in using travel agency for Couch Surfers are in information search and evaluation alternative stage. Even travel agency does try to approach Couch Surfers and customers alike by cooperate with intermediaries as well as offering last minute or package offer but travel agencies are ignored by Couch Surfers. Couch Surfers don’t have intention to use travel agency’s travel information technologies application as the best tool for searching information. Travel agency’s technologies applications are more likely a normal free way to find information that they may find through primary tool search engine. In short, with easy trip which they can find related information through internet, Couch Surfers tend to ignore travel agency and its travel information technologies totally. Couch Surfers pay more attention in searching and using information from travel agency when they are travel as non Couch Surfer with friends, family or lack of information about the destination. The shortage of information includes the situation when they don’t have free accommodation, far, unsafe destination, long haul trip thus they requires being more secured and guaranteed services. Suggestions for travel agencies are drawn in attracting more tourist segments including Couch Surfers. There are blur lines between different stages of Couch Surfers decision making process. In another words, Couch Surfers are flexible and are willing to buy offers from travel agency even the package consist of accommodation if travel agency can offer good price. It seems like information’s quality and price have a great effect to Couch Surfers decision making.
7. Final concluding

The thesis has aimed to study the Couch Surfers decision making process in relation to information technologies. In order to reach the research aim, three questions are raised ”What kind of information technological applications do they usually use? How Couch Surfers interact with travel information technological applications in travel agency? And How flexible are Couch Surfers in relation to travel information technologies in decision making process?"

After analyzing data, the first conclusion is drawn that: Couch Surfers rely heavily on information technologies in decision making process. Search engine, compared price software (new travel base intermediaries), electronic word of mouth tools (web 2.0) and online reservation system are widely used among Couch Surfers while travel tailor made system with accommodation is less used. It is argued that these popular information technology applications help the Couch Surfer to visualize travel’s product and services before going to make final decision. Search engines can filter information for Couch Surfers from general topic to more specific sources so it can be used in every stages of decision making process. Compared price software and web 2.0 are more useful in searching information and evaluating alternatives. Online reservation system is used when Couch Surfers make the purchase decision.

The reason that information technologies mentioned above are popular as they are easy to use and give effective result which allow Couch Surfers access multiple information at the same times. Moreover, it is argued that as a free, customize oriented tools, they can give Couch Surfers authentic experiences and clearer picture of services/ product before consume it. While search engines are usually used in the first step to find general information, new travel base intermediaries with meta search engine help Couch Surfers to filter more specific information such as flight tickets or accommodation. Web 2.0 where users are also website’s content builder is understood as electronic word of mouth source for Couch Surfers looking for authentic information. Last but not least, online reservation and payment systems are popular as its convenience, time saving. The main function of these information technological applications is to help Couch Surfers visualize and assessment places, services as much comprehensive as possible.
The second conclusion is about Couch Surfer’s willingness in using travel agency’s information technology applications in a certain level. Couch Surfers feel being excluded by travel agency as they can’t get much information from travel agency. However, Couch Surfers are willing to gain benefit from travel agency by consuming good offers in last minutes or packages with the priority consideration in price. On the other hand, Couch Surfers don’t have intention to use travel agency as best sources for searching information but not more than a free information source found via search engines. In this case, travel agencies are ignored by Couch Surfers. It is shown that Couch Surfers pay more attention in searching and using information from travel agency when they are travel as non Couch Surfer with friends, family or lack of information about the destination. The chance of using travel agency is when Couch Surfers don’t have free accommodation or travel to a far, unsafe destination, long haul trip thus they requires being more secured and guaranteed services. Quality and price are argued to be main reasons Couch Surfers make purchase decision from travel agency. This could be a suggestion for travel agency to attract this type of tourist segment.

Last but not least, Couch Surfers are very flexible. They can easily change their decision to travel as a Couch Surfer or not. It is concluded that there are blur lines between different stages of Couch Surfers decision making process which means Couch Surfers are flexible and can change purchase decision in every stage of process. They are willing to buy offers from travel agency even the package consist of accommodation if travel agency can offer good price. If so they can easily switch from being a Couch Surfers or non Couch Surfer travelers.

This thesis is contributing to fill the lack of academic literature in consumers behavior in general and is one of the founding literatures for Couch Surfers’ behavior in particular. The common knowledge about using information technologies by Couch Surfers in decision making process is found. Looking at a broader view, Couch Surfers can be called a new generation of new tourist. It is analyzed and concluded that Couch Surfers hold “new tourists” characteristics which are more sophisticated and independent and demand more effective and money value product and services. They are enjoy finding, comparing information and making decision process in order to pay the least money and receive the best services by prefer to go direct to services’ suppliers but not via intermediaries. However they do buy services through
intermediaries if they find the “best deal” in price but normally without noticing the intermediaries’ name. Their less loyalty is affected by the development of technology. In another word, it is argued that Couch Surfers reflect “new tourists” and also be “a new generation of new tourists” thanks to the development of technologies.

Comparing between empirical findings and the theory, the Kotler’s decision making process is important to be a guide line in doing research and finding Couch Surfer’s decision making process. However the Kotler’s decision making process model is not simply followed. The original model is presented in five stages; one is followed by one stage. Indeed, it is argued that there are less clear lines between stages. For example, Couch Surfers can combine three first stages of need recognition, information searching and evaluate alternatives in the same time. The order of stages could be changed. For example, Couch Surfers can base on information search and evaluating alternatives before decided their need to go to a certain place. Moreover, the time between stages is short that Couch Surfers even can make purchase decision in a short notice of found information.

Refer to the aim of the study to see how Couch Surfers interact with travel information technology application in their decision making process, the study has shown that the interaction is a complex and is affected by different factors. Generalizing the case, it is said that, consumers are heavily rely on information technology in a sophisticated way. The travel information technology source is mainly on the internet. Consumers are flexible and base on different criteria to make decision. Factors could affect tourists’ decision including time, price, services’ quality, value of money, convenience.

Positioning the findings from this study in a wider perspective, Couch Surfer could be a new trend of new tourist in the future. Tourists may earn more free benefit for their trip and hard to persuade to pay for services. They are become even more sophisticated and demanding. Services’ quality, price, benefit and added value are required to be considered.

Some suggestions for improving travel agency’s technology applications have been drawn. Follow the suggestion of Buhalis (2000), travel agency website need to have user friendly
and customized interface, automatic translation as well as providing good price and clear, sophisticated information. Travel agency also can apply some technique to be optimized in search engines’ result as well as in word of mouth channel like Couch Surfing website to attract Couch Surfers. These suggestions also are applicable to service suppliers and organizations which are interested in Couch Surfers tourist segment.

Moreover, with the assistance of this finding about Couch Surfers’ behavior in decision making process, Couch Surfing organization can find the way to make profit. Since the Couch Surfing has changed to benefit cooperate organization, suggestion for Couch Surfing to cooperate with services providers including travel agency and to add more technology applications such as meta-searching engines can help Couch Surfing organization earn profit through advertisement or travel related service. In addition Couch Surfers also benefit from it as they will save time in searching and choosing travel information in another websites or search engines.

For further study, a question about the factor influence to decision making process is raised. Even in this study, some factors are mentioned already but in a limit time and limit scale, the exactly conclusion has not been drawn yet. In addition, from this study, it is shown that Couch Surfers have a certain intend to use travel information technology from travel agency however; most of them ignore travel agency in a short and casual trips. Besides, one Couch Surfers has raised the issue the way travel agency approach them is a trap and it is confirmed by others Couch Surfers by their reluctant of using information from travel agency. Combination these concerns, a topic of how to attract new tourists in general and Couch Surfers in particular to use and take more benefits from travel agency. How to build a strong relationship and trust between new tourists including Couch Surfers and travel agency could be a question for further study.
Reference


Olmeda, I., Sheldon, P. (2001), "Data mining techniques and applications for tourism Internet marketing", *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 11 No.2-3, pp.1-20


Xianga and Gretzelb, 2009 Role of social media in online travel information search *Tourism Management 31* (2), 179–188


Appendix:

General questions

1. Please tell me about when your interest in couch surfing first began?
2. Which IT do you use to plan your trip? Website, search engine, blog, forum?
3. How do you use IT to plan your trip?
4. Have you ever used the travel agency’s website when you were planning your trip? How did you use it? If no, which kind of website/IT do you usually use the most? Why?
5. Why did you use travel agency’s website?

Detail questions:

Stage 1: Need recognition

6. Have you ever look at the travel agency’s website to find a next destination for your trip? If no, do you think travel agency’s website can help you to define which one is your next place to visit?

Or where do you usually find your idea about the next destination?

Stage 2: Information search

7. When you look at the travel agency website, which information do you intend to find first? What is the last thing you’d like to find in travel agency’s website

Or where do you usually find the information online? which information do you intend to find first? What is the last thing you’d like to find in travel agency’s website?

Stage 3: Evaluation of alternatives

8. a/ When you are looking for cheap price, do you search/use the compare price software in travel agency’s website?
Or do you use the compare price website to evaluate your choice?

b/ In case that travel agency offer a little bit higher price and can buy online compare with the service supplier’s price (hotel, air ticket, train ticket) but only available for walk in customer, which company do you prefer? Why

Stage 4: Purchase decision
9. Have you ever bought any services/packages/tickets from travel agency’s website? Online or offline? Why did you chose it?/ If no, why? do you think you would buy it in the future?

Stage 5: Post purchase behavior

10. In travel agency’s website there are travelers’ blog where customers sharing their experience about the destination, services during their trip. Are blogs useful for you? If no where do you find other’s experiences?

About intention of using travel agency’s IT applications

11. Do you have any specific source to check whenever you are planning a trip? If yes, is there any one of them is travel agency? Why?
   If no, which source do you usually use? Why?
12. Did you find the travel agencies’ technological application such as website, electronic payment, forum, ect helpful for your trip’s planning process? Which one is the most useful?
   If no which technological applications in general do you find the most helpful? Why?

Addition questions:

13. If Couch Surfers can not find a host in a place you want to go, will it affect to your decision? How
14. Is there any difference in planning your trip since you are Couch Surfers? How?