LUND UNIVERSITY
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Sleeping with Strangers

Redefining Experiences in a CouchSurfing World

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This thesis seeks to examine the relationship between authenticity, intimacy and co-creation in regards to tourism experiences. In order to explore the relationship between the three phenomena, the visitor/host interaction facilitated through CouchSurfing, an international online hospitality network, is used. This thesis focuses on the analyses of tourist experiences, drawing from narratives provided by interviewees. A sample of CouchSurfers were asked to share and elaborate on their opinions, and beliefs about CouchSurfing. From my findings I determined that authentic experiences are intimate, and most often involve interaction with local people. Authenticity and intimacy work concurrently with each other, meaning that when intimacy is experienced between host/guest, the experience feels more authentic and vice versa. It has been concluded that Co-creation helps make an experience authentic. Tourists and locals are linked through emotions and connections that arise from interaction together. Intimacy allows for meaningful co-creation, and meaningful co-creation way to authentic experiences.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this first chapter I present the research aim, and the research questions that will help me to fulfill this aim. I provide a brief introduction to the research area, and it's relevance in relation to the research aim. Furthermore, I will conclude this chapter with an outline of the thesis and its structure.

The introduction of Pine and Gilmore's (1998) Experience Economy has forever changed the way we view products and services. In order for a firm to survive in this ever competitive economy they must find a way to differentiate themselves from the rest and instead of merely offering a product to consumers they should sell experiences instead. Pine and Gilmore (1998) further suggest that the value of an experience is linked to the degree in which visitors interact with their surrounding environment. From this came the development of "co-creation", with Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2003, 2004) being at the forefront of co-creation literature. They argue that customers find value in the actual process of co-creation itself; and in fact most of the value is derived from the settings, activities and people it takes to create the experience. Practically speaking, almost all of the current co-creation literature has been written from a business perspective with particular emphasis on the role of producer and consumer. This signals a latent need for revision, and Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009) suggest just that. They find it perplexing that the tourism industry, which is arguably all about experiences, is neglected from the current co-creation literature. Given this, they suggest that co-creation literature needs to be expanded in order to accommodate tourism's influence on the subject.

An organization called "CouchSurfing"- an online hospitality exchange network that facilitates co-creation by connecting the local with the tourist will be of particular interest for this thesis. It is important to note that throughout this thesis, the term "CouchSurfing" will be exclusively referring to an online hospitality network, and not as a kind of homelessness for young people as discussed by Perez and Romo (2009). Moreover, CouchSurfing is a new (and very rapidly expanding) way for people to "experience" local cultures and destinations. When a person participates in CouchSurfing, they are welcomed into a stranger's home and invited into

their private life. They get a chance to see how local people live, and get a look into the daily life of a culture. The most fascinating part of all of this is that no monetary compensation is expected, accommodation is not provided in hopes of financial gain. Welcoming someone you've never met before into your home, and sharing a piece of your life with them for no monetary compensation, is a stark contrast to traditional hospitality (hotels, B &B's, etc). This has many implications for tourism today. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted in this field thus far, and given that online hospitality networks are increasing in popularity and are quickly becoming a new phenomenon in tourism, it is clear that online hospitality networks are a very relevant topic to study further and merit a deeper understanding.

MacCannell (1973) argues that tourists are constantly in pursuit of authenticity and authentic experience when travelling. Much debate surrounding what constitutes the "authentic" has been established in tourism (MacCannel 1973, Wang, 1999, Cohen 1988), however it seems that there is no one definition for it, no one way to determine authenticity. Its meaning is subjective, and changes depending on the person, context, and time, just to give a few examples. The only thing that is certain is that tourists typically seek it, as MacCannell suggested.

I would also like to point out, and make it transparent that I myself have been a member of the CouchSurfing website since October of 2009. More information on my involvement will be detailed in the chapter on methodology. Given my experience I argue that co-creating with the locals leads to a more authentic tourism experiences, than compared with only associating with fellow travelers. CouchSurfing is a means of facilitating this co-creation, by connecting local people and tourists. As I will argue further on in this thesis, CouchSurfing creates a sense of non-commercial intimacy between the host and guest. I think that it is through this intimate relationship with a local that helps to facilitate an authentic experience. Bialski (2006) uses the term "emotional tourism" to elaborate on, "…the emotions linked to the closeness achieved with another human being…" and that it is, "…the experience of human-to-human emotion". I believe that it is this closeness and emotion between humans that makes for authenticity of experiences. In order to investigate this phenomenon, I will look at the nature of people's

tourism experiences in order to gain an understanding of how co-creation and authenticity relate to each other within tourism.

1.1 RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTION

Research Aim:

The aim of this paper is to explore how co-creation and intimacy are associated with authentic experiences in tourism.

Research Questions:

- *How do CouchSurfers refer to the event of co-creation?*
- *How do CouchSurfers describe their experience of CouchSurfing in terms of authenticity?*
- *Do intimacy and authenticity have a causal relationship?*

In order to fulfill my aim, I plan on exploring the relationship between co-creation and authentic experiences using the visitor/ host interaction facilitated through CouchSurfing, an international online hospitality network (which you find explained in further detail later in this thesis).

1.2 OUTLINE

I have divided this thesis into seven major sections, including the list of references. In the next section you will find a presentation of the theoretical literature relevant to this thesis. Section three is a presentation of the case. The fourth section elaborates on the methodological thought processes and tools used to interpret the data. The fifth section presents the research findings, while the sixth section provides a conclusion and discussion of the results. Finally this paper ends with suggestions for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following section I will provide a discussion of the current theories by the most notable authors in the fields of Authenticity, Co-creation and Intimacy. At first glance, it may seem strange to put Authenticity, Co-creation and Intimacy all in the same category. As you will see, these three phenomena appear to be seemingly unrelated; a quick look through the past (as well as current) tourism literature would even back that up, as they are rarely discussed in relation with or to each other.

In my research I have found that these phenomena do in fact relate to each other in a complex and intricate way when applied to tourism experiences. When it comes to experiences within tourism, most tourists you ask, as well as most of the literature you read will tell you that tourists seek out and want authentic experiences. As you will read in the following section, most people do not want to experience the fake, the commercial nor the staged. People want to experience the authentic- and whatever they deem to be authentic in their own mind (which will be discussed in the following section). Given this, I see that co-creation between the host and guest in a tourism setting (ex: staying with someone in their home, exchanging ideas, conversing over coffee, etc.) inevitably leads to an increased amount of intimacy between the two parties (whether it is physical, verbal, spiritual or intellectual) and that this intimacy resulting from co-creation leads to more authentic experiences in tourism. Therefore, I see it fit to re-write tourism experience literature and introduce these three phenomena into the discussion.

2.1 AUTHENTICITY

The notion of authenticity itself is quite complex, and one cannot easily define it. Given this, the tourism industry has been host to substantial debates regarding the concept of authenticity, some on the more known authors on this subject include MacCannell (1973), Cohen (1988), Urry (2002) and Wang (1999) while many, many others have attempted to tackle

this formidable opponent such as Lozanski (2010), Taylor (2001), and Haldrup and Larsen (2003).

Dean MacCannell first began the debate about authenticity in tourism quite some time ago. In his work, he likens the tourists' quest for authenticity to that of a religious pilgrimage. According to MacCannell (1973), pilgrims sought out places where an important religious event took place, whereas tourists bring themselves to social, historical and cultural places of importance. However, it is clear that although tourists may seek the authentic these tourist-pilgrims are "damned to inauthenticity"; according to Cohen the mass tourism industry misleads tourists and convinces them to believe in the contrived and falsely staged settings that constantly surround them(1988:373). Tourists attempt to get behind the curtain and see inside the "back" areas, into people's real lives; however these "back" areas are often really just staged "front" areas, which trick and mislead tourists into believing false realities. As MacCannell (1973) points out, "Tourists make brave sorties out from their hotels hoping, perhaps, for small increments of what is for them increasingly apparent authenticity proffered by [staged] tourist settings. Adventurous tourists progress from stage to stage, always in the public eye, and greeted everywhere by their obliging hosts" (602). Thus meaning that even if tourists really do want to seek out authentic experiences they will not be able to find them due to the commercialization and commodification of these pre-planned and "staged" settings. MacCannell (1973:594) further provides an example suggesting that mass tourism entities often dress places to seem remote and non-touristic in order to entice unknowing tourists into coming and "discovering" them. Cohen (1988) affirms this by adding that sometimes natives who inhabit far-away exotic places sometimes even pretend to be more"native" in order to be perceived as more authentic by on-looking tourists.

However as Cohen points out, in order to fully align with MacCannell's rationale one must, "adopt a view of modern society as completely absurd and dominated by sinister powers, so that its members are surreptitiously misled to believe that they have genuinely authentic experiences, while in fact being systematically debarred from having them" (1988: 373). In contrast to MacCannell, Cohen (1988) sees authenticity as a socially constructed concept, in

which its meaning and social connotation can be negotiated. For example, he suggests that the more intelligent a person is, the more aware they will be and the more they will desire and have stricter criteria for "authenticity". He suggests that the average more run of the mill tourists do not expect as much and are less concerned with questioning how "authentic" or "inauthentic" something is. This is something that MacCannell did not take into consideration- the fact that tourists may have a different idea of authenticity than a researcher or sociologist , for example. Goldberg (1983:486) in Cohen (1988), further suggests that tourists accept or believe "authenticity" in different levels of severity; thus people who are not as concerned with authenticity of their tourism experience will be more willing to accept something as "authentic" then those tourists who are more concerned, and thus more severe in there critique of what is "authentic" and "non-authentic". Cohen again brings up an interesting argument in his consideration of the "Other". It goes without saying that tourism and the "Other" are very much related. Cohen strikes an interesting chord when he proposes that, "the deeper the experience sought by the tourist, the more strongly will he tend to embrace this "Other", and turn it into his "elective center" (1988:376); meaning that the more a tourist seeks the "Other" and wants to experience the "Other" when travelling, the more authenticity becomes significant for that tourist, the two rise in proportion to each other. As a consequence, those who seek the "Other" more feverously will thus have a stricter criterion than those who do not. Cohen (1988) suggests there are five types of tourists, each with varying requirements/criteria for the "authentic". "Existential" tourists are those who as mentioned above, seek out "Otherness" and have a high demand for authenticity; however, according to Cohen they are at risk for falling into MacCannell's "Staged Authenticity" traps since they lack the academic training that helps to recognize the traits that make up "authentic" and "inauthentic". Next are "Experimental" tourists, followed by "Experiential" tourists who like the "existential" tourist have a strict criterion for authenticity. Then he names "Recreational" tourists who are more playful and thus accept a much broader idea of "authenticity" and more easily mislead by "staged authenticity". Finally, he proposes a "Diversionary" tourist is only concerned with entertainment and leisure, and thus has no concern for "authenticity" at all. Ultimately, it comes down to subjectivity. As Cohen (1988) flawlessly points out, " the question here in *not*

whether the individual does or does not "really" have an authentic experience in MacCannell's (1973) sense, but rather what endows his experience with authenticity in his *own* view" (378, emphasis in original). Authenticity is different to different people, and can change within time and space. What is considered authentic by one person, could be completely dismissed as contrived or staged by another person. Adding to that, what a person believes to be authentic now could be completely different in five or ten year's time.

Following this discussion, Wang (1999) touches upon a constructivist approach similar to that of Cohen's (1988) which is discussed above. (For more on constructivism see E. Bruner 1991, 1994).Wang (1999) suggests that, "authenticity is not a matter of black or white, but rather involves a much wider spectrum, rich in ambiguous colors. That which is judged as inauthentic or staged authenticity by experts, intellectuals, or elite may be experienced as authentic and real from an emic Perspective"(5). Authenticity is subjective, and could be argued for or against by someone in almost any situation. Wang (1999) breaks down three types of authenticity in tourist experience, the first two, "Objective" and "Constructive" Authenticity are Object-related. The former is concerned with the authenticity of originals, while the latter is concerned with authenticity being projected onto the objects seen/visited by the tourist or producer. In both cases authenticity is somewhat symbolic. Both "objective" and "constructive" authenticity fall more in line with MacCannell's (1973) objectivist approach to the concept. The third type is Activity-related and this is an "Existential" type of authenticity that results from the tourist activity itself, and it should be made clear that this type of authenticity has nothing to do with objects and thus warrants a different classification. By introducing this new concept, Wang (1999) calls for a revision to the ways we conceive the "authentic". He proposes that the previous theories are too simple and do not capture the complexity of the topic. Wang (1999) suggests that authenticity is socially constructed, and reality is a result of our own personal understanding and creation. Schwandt (1994:125) in Wang (1999:354) affirms that, "what we take to be objective knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind". More plainly, he suggests that different people can have numerous different perspectives about one or many things depending on the situation and context.

Furthermore, nothing is set in stone; everything is negotiable and can be reconstructed by society. Finally, Wang (1999) introduces a few common viewpoints on authenticity held by constructivists that will be briefly introduced. First, authenticity has no absolute origin. (E.Bruner 1994) Second, traditions and origin are social constructs, and do not remain static in time. (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, E. Bruner 1994). Thirdly, Authenticity and Inauthenticity are relative, and derived from personal interpretations- not based on what an expert says is real or fake. (Cohen 1988, Pearce and Moscardo 1985, 1986, Redfoot 1984) Fourthly, authenticity in regards to the assessment of a foreign culture is often based on stereotypes held by the visiting culture. Wang (1999:355) terms authenticity as a *"projection"* of what the tourist already believes about a culture. Finally, authenticity is an "emerging process" and what might not be considered authentic now, will be in the future (Wang, 1999).

Lastly, authenticity from a postmodern perspective offers a slightly different take. Urry (2002) rejects MacCannell's viewpoint that tourism is essentially just a quest for authenticity as "incorrect" and instead argues that authenticity is an "important component". In his work, Urry (2002) draws upon the ideas of Feifer (1985) who argues that some visitors are what he terms "post-tourists" and these types of tourists thrive in contrived inauthentic settings. They reject the idea of a true authentic tourism experience, and as he puts it "almost delight" in the constructed, artificial settings that contemporary tourism offers today. This is an interesting take on the authenticity debate and as mentioned earlier is in complete contrast to MacCannell's idea that the point of tourism is to seek authenticity. Instead it falls more in line with the views of Wang and Cohen when they speak of a constructivist approach where authenticity derives from the actual experience not from an observed object. For post-tourists, going to Disneyland is of course a contrived setting, but the experience that they have in that setting is what is authentic. In the end, there is no one the solution to the question "what is authenticity?", there may not be a solution at all, just a web of ideas, opinions and theories.

2.1.1 HOSPITALITY

Authenticity and hospitality typically do not appear together in academic contexts; however this does not mean that they are not related. By the end of this thesis I will make their connection more transparent, through the provision of concrete examples; having said that, it is important to first gain an understanding of the concept. Hospitality is a multifarious concept that has been explored both practically and abstractly in a variety of intellectual fields. In general terms, hospitality has been frequently defined as, "a contemporaneous human exchange, which is voluntarily entered into, and designed to enhance the mutual well being of the parties concerned through the provision of accommodation, and/or food, and/or drink" (Brotherton, 1999:168, as quoted in Lugosi, 2009:398). However, further discussion and debate among researchers has led to an expansion of the definition. Hospitality has been interpreted through different intellectual lenses. For example, Selwyn (2000) interprets hospitality from an anthropological approach and argues that hospitality is instead a social practice, and the exchanges that typically take place (like those detailed in Brotherton's definition), facilitate the construction of host and guest identities. Additionally, Derrida (2000) conceptualizes hospitality on a philosophical level and asserts that pure forms of hospitality are unachievable and consequently do not exist (as quoted in Lugosi, 2009:399). Hospitality is always governed in some way or another by rules, boundaries and limitations. Lastly, O'Conner (2005) introduces an interesting supposition that perhaps hospitality is inherent in human nature, and thus people are able to suspect when hospitality is presented genuinely or not. He posits this in regards to a service environment such as a restaurant, for example, however this could be applicable in other situations as well.

2.2 CO-CREATION

Conventionally "Co-creation" has been discussed in terms of business, with emphasis on the role of producer and consumer. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2003, 2004) have been at the forefront of the co-creation literature. It has been argued that experiences are only as valuable

as the settings, activities, and persons it takes to create them, and that value actually derives from the process of co-creation itself (Prahalad et al., 2004). Additionally, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2003) as well as Ter Borg (2003) (quoted in Binkhorst and Den Dekker, 2009) suggest that people find value in actually being able to take part in the creation of their own experience, even though the experience itself may hold some stand alone value, more value can be attributed to the experience when someone is personally engaged and included in the co-creation process. Pine and Gilmore (1998) further this argument by suggesting that the value of an experience is linked to the degree in which visitors interact with their surrounding environment. Having said this, it is important to point out further that since the consumer brings personal meaning to the co-creation process, the value derived from the interaction between the co-creators is determined by the consumer's perception of value in the experience environment (or more specifically, the context of place and time). In the end, the quality of an experience is purely subjective and reliant on the consumer's idea of value as well as their personal involvement in the co-creation process.

Furthermore Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009) argue that co-creation can be observed in tourism and that given this there is a need to expand upon co-creation's influence on tourism. For them it is strange that, "one of the biggest experience generators, tourism, is not mentioned" (315) in the co-creation experience literature. They assert that just as consumer needs and preferences were previously ignored in the business world, "tourists are rarely included as partners in the process of designing the tourism experience beforehand" (315). However, they provide a few examples where this is changing such as: GoCar in San Francisco, KLM Globe assistant on Google Earth, and interactive city guides provided jointly by Lonely Planet and Playstation just to name a few. Poon (1993) as referenced in Binkhorst et al. (2009) suggests that a type of 'new tourist' who takes control has arisen and evidence of this can be seen in the growing number of people who tend to their own travel needs by consulting the internet. In fact, the internet has become a source for all sorts of co-creation between both tourists and potential tourists; for example virtual tourism communities provide first hand information about experiences, and online hospitality exchange websites including CouchSurfing are on the rise as well (Binkhorst et al, 2009). Ertimur and Venkatesh (2010)

argue that, "value co-creation implies that consumers become part of the collection of partners with whom the firm has to cooperate with in order to create value" (258). In the tourism sense, this means that the actual tourists would be involved in this creation process. An example of this is seen when Binkhorst et al, (2009) highlights another observed type of co-creation, that of co-creation between visitors and locals that occurs both while at the destination as well as beforehand. Now instead of idly standing by and watching things happen, many tourists insist on being a part of the action. People do not want to march along on an organized tour like drones listening to a tour guide give the same rehearsed speech over again for the millionth time. Instead people are now participating in meaningful and unique individual interactions with local people. Examples of which can be found at websites such as: 'Like-a-local.com' which allows guests to "step into the daily life of a local" and 'Dinewiththedutch.nl' that allows visitors to join a Dutch family for a meal (318). Most notably for this paper, is 'CouchSurfing.org', which will be explained in further detail later on in this paper. I want to expand upon Binkhorst et al.'s (2009) initial work, using CouchSurfing as a means to facilitate the discussion. Additionally, little literature has been written about this phenomenon so far, I feel that I could add to this discussion by working with this subject matter, as Binkhorst et al (2009) suggests, "with the growing interest to learn about other cultures, tourism experiences increasingly are a means for interaction with others" (324).

2.3 INTIMACY

Intimacy is multifaceted and there are many variations and outlooks on it. Many varying types of intimacy exist between people resulting from, for example, friendship, family ties, love, work or school, etc. These relationships can have a long history with deep and meaningful bonds, or intimacy could also be brief and sudden resulting from chance or other circumstances. Piorkowski and Cardone (2000) present an insightful argument in which they propose that four types of intimacy exist. First there is *physical intimacy* (real contact with someone), second is *verbal intimacy* (communicating or sharing words with someone, etc.), third is *spiritual intimacy* (common values and beliefs with someone) and lastly *intellectual intimacy* (reflection and sharing of knowledge with another). Trauer and Ryan (2005) suggest

that two types of intimacy can develop in tourism, first you have intimacy created in a place, which derives from interactions with a person local to that place, and second that the level of intimacy and the meaning attributed result from the extent and context of the interaction between the people who visit the place. In reference to the first type of intimacy, Trauer *et al.* (2005) argue that, "a place or space to which a tourist is being introduced by someone with intense, longitudinal experiences of, and association with, creates a level of intimacy to which a 'normal' tourist would never be exposed" (482). Considering this, it seems that the people you travel with affect how you experience and interpret a place. Experiencing a place with someone who is a local to it, and who has a relationship with it can lead to extremely intimate experiences. Whereas it can be assumed that experiencing a place through the help of someone also unknown to it or with no relationship with it would mean that less intimate experiences can be expected as a result. If I was to show someone my hometown, I would not be able to have an objective approach. As I showed a guest the popular sights and places to visit, I would inevitably recount my guest with story after story about my experiences in those places. For example, the beach near my house is not just any beach, it's *the* beach where I learned how to surf, and where I take my dog to swim on hot days, and the Mexican restaurant around the corner would not be just any restaurant it is *the* restaurant where I have celebrated everything possible for as long as I can remember, from birthdays, to graduations, farewell as well as welcoming home parties; it's the place where I automatically get a table even if the line is out the door, because my family has been eating there for the twenty years it has been in business. Therefore, they would know the place through me and my history and relationship to it, and as a result perhaps a little bit of my relationship becomes theirs. In contrast to this, would be those people who experience a place on their own, or perhaps through an organized tour group where no personal details or anecdotes about the place are shared, everything they know about the place comes from what they learn, feel and see on their own. Affirming this, Trauer *et al.* (2005:483) states that, "the tourist interacts with and is influenced by both place visited and the people met at those places", while Stowkowski (2002) avows that people's lives are chronicled, "…in relation to others and in relation to the meaningful places created and contained in one's surroundings" (373). It can be suggested then, that tourists and locals are

linked through emotions and connections that arise from interactions together (Wearing and Wearing 2001; Rothman 1978; Prentice, Witt and Wydenbach 1994; Woosnam *et al.,* 2009; Trauer *et al.,* 2005*)*.

As enlightening as this all may seem, I believe that it is important to note that these intimate experiences that tourists seek can also sometimes be staged, in order to deceive the tourist into thinking that they are sharing a more intimate moment than reality allows. This can happen for a number of reasons, including the hosts desire to protect the intimacy of the place (Woosnam, Norman and Ying 2009), as well as the host's reaction to being used and abused by the visitor (Wearing and Wearing 2001). Stowkowski (2002) notes that this can turn insightful host/guest interaction into nothing more than an economic exchange. These so called pseudo-intimate moments are similar to MacCannell's front-stage/ Back-stage discussion that was presented in a previous section (2.1). Woosnam *et al.* (2009), as well as Johnston (2006) agree that this can have a negative effect on the experience and often times can even objectify the unsuspecting tourist.

Another aspect of intimacy worth mentioning is that of people's travel motivations. Trauer *et al.* (2005) questions whether or not people's travel motivation highlight a latent need for intimacy (through human relationships) that could perhaps be lacking in their daily lives. Bialski (2006) whose current work deals with CouchSurfing, alleges that people's motivations for travel, "… are directly stimulated by the forces of post-modernity, and involve the need to be close to another human being, and the need to re-establish the concept of "self" to another foreign person"(2). Bialski (2006) draws upon the work of sociologists such as Durkheim, Gergen, and Fukuyama when she argues that today's modern society has led to weak family ties and social relationships in general, and this hollowness spawning from a lack of solid social connections and ties compels people to seek more significant relationships elsewhere. Bialski (2007) has termed this new kind of tourism resulting from people's need for intimacy as "*Intimate Tourism*", and defines it as "a system of exchange in which the individual tours and experiences intimacy, in space and relationships, rather than just in the tourism-dominated environment" (76). She adds that that both verbal intimacy achieved through conversations,

and spatial intimacy as a result of limited physical distance between people are characteristic of *Intimate Tourism* (Bialski, 2007). Andersson Cederholm and Hultman (2010: 17) futher add that, "warmth, trust, spontaneity, sometimes chaos, and proximity are dimensions in the intimate experience". For now I will leave the discussion on Intimacy, and expand upon the work of Bialski further on in this thesis.

3. COUCH-SURFING: An Introduction

Before I go any further with this paper, it is important to first provide a brief overview of the history, along with a detailed explanation of CouchSurfing. This chapter will provide an introduction to the case study. A short history, as well as current statistics from CouchSurfing will be provided.

Due to the fact that CouchSurfing is such a relatively new phenomenon little research has been published about it. Given this, all of the research presented here regarding CouchSurfing has been obtained from the organizations official website "CouchSurfing.org". CouchSurfing is a non-profit organization, and its website is maintained/ran by CouchSurfing employees themselves, and the Member Experience Department is responsible for the look and feel of the website, as well as for providing information to the site's members. Information about CouchSurfing is easily accessible from the website and all information seems to be quite transparent. Due to this, it can be assumed that CouchSurfing.org is an acceptable and trustworthy media source from which to obtain information.

CouchSurfing International Inc. is an international online hospitality exchange network that connects people from over 246 countries and territories around the globe. It operates as a non-profit organization, and as such offers free membership to its members. CouchSurfing is by far the largest online hospitality exchange network with 2.7 million registered users as of April 2011, and the network is rapidly expanding with roughly 2616 new members signing up daily. (CouchSurfing.org) According to the website, CouchSurfing is a tool that that allows its members to interact and get to know each other in order to facilitate cultural exchange,

learning experiences and friendships internationally. Members exchange hospitality with one another, typically through hosting and *surfing*- which is the CouchSurfing term for "staying with a local as a guest in their home" (CouchSurfing.org). This means that travelers from around the world can log onto the CouchSurfing website, search and find a host to stay with, send a request, and if confirmed by the host, they can come and live in their private home for a certain amount of time. The website further suggests that through CouchSurfing people from all over the globe can share and engage in "meaningful cross-cultural exchanges and experiences with other members and make connections across oceans, continents and cultures". The organization suggests that by reducing the cost of travel (as CouchSurfing is a free service where monetary exchange is strictly forbidden) people can more easily participate in the above mentioned cultural exchanges and improve international relations by, "opening our homes, our hearts, and our lives" (CouchSurfing.org). This is done by allowing people to use the money they would have spent on accommodation, on other things like travelling further/more frequently, or by engaging in more activities while in a destination. The front page of their website is filled with testimonials and random quotes from CouchSurfers around the globe talking about their experiences, and the relationships they had with their host/guest. The exchange of culture, and sharing of knowledge that these testimonials elaborate on, all hint at the idea of CouchSurfing providing them with a more genuine and real experience, allowing them to connect with local people and see how life really is in the places they visit. This is a very strong example of how CouchSurfing in a way promotes authenticity (or more specifically authentic tourism experiences) to prospective users. The testimonials convince prospective users that the experiences had will be more extraordinary due to the close contact and meaningful interaction that are had between host and guest. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis I assert that more authentic experiences arise from co-creation and intimacy that is facilitated through host/guest interactions that are provided by organizations like CouchSurfing.

Below is a map displaying a graphical representation of where CouchSurfing members are located, with the red dots representing CouchSurfer locations:

Figure 1: CouchSurfing members by geography (CouchSurfing.org)
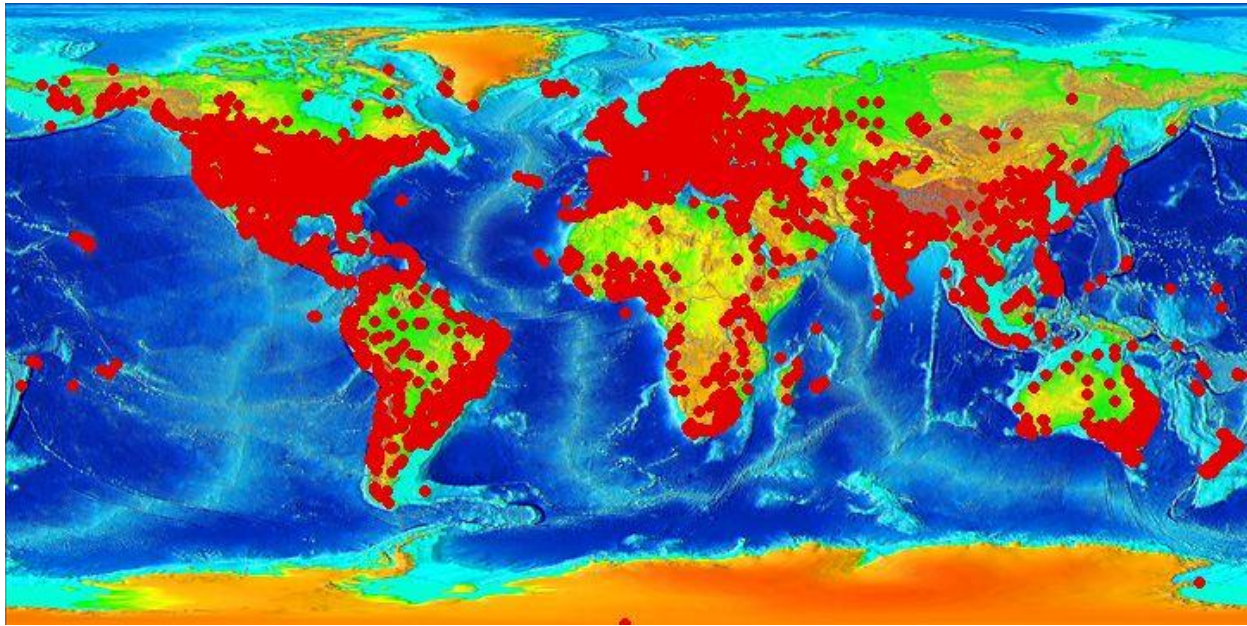
Vision and Mission Statement

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

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."* (CouchSurfing.org)

It is quite obvious from the vision and mission statement that CouchSurfing markets experiences to its users. Furthermore, it promotes them as being different, inspiring and in other words, more authentic than those typically experienced in traditional tourism environments like hotels, for example.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter seeks to provide an overview of the methods employed to help answer the proposed research questions. A detailed explanation of both my chosen method: Semi-structured interviews, as well as analytical tools: Grounded Theory, will be provided. This chapter will conclude with a reflection of the methodological process.

Methodology is a vital component when conducting research no matter what field one studies in. Smith (2010) considers methods to be the tools and procedures used by a researcher. Building on that, it is crucial that the researcher takes care in selecting an appropriate method, as not all methods are suitable in all circumstances. Given the nature of my research, I feel that a qualitative approach is the most useful way for me to obtain necessary and relevant data about tourist experiences. Tourist narratives give a better explanation of experiences than do quantitative methods that require the pure use of numbers and figures. Convincingly, Volo asserts that in tourism research, "the most intriguing issue has been to measure the tourist experience characteristics and meanings and its relationship to motivations, needs, attractions, tourist typologies, past and future experiences, familiarity, authenticity, knowledge, learning, (and) memory"(2009: 116). With my research I attempt to do just that, discover the characteristics that make or break the experiences of tourists; as well as uncover the attributing factors-like authenticity, to give an example. Additionally, Riley and Love (2000), assert that, "qualitative research provides a crucial perspective that helps scholars *understand* phenomena in a different way from a positivist perspective alone" (168). Qualitative research allows for a different, more situational and human way of interpreting the world around us rather than traditional scientific inquiry. It allows us the freedom to interpret, analyze and synthesize our own thoughts and opinion on the phenomena based on the information uncovered. Additionally, Andereck *et al*, (2005) as quoted in Morgan and Xu (2009), continue this point by arguing that, "only after in-depth interviews, continuous studies or participant observation can the researcher gain access to the stories which reveal the true meaning and value of an experience" (222). Extracting tourism narratives and individual's interpretations of meaning and experiences cannot be easily acquired through quantitative

methods that typically provide sets of data in numerical form like statistics and graphs for example. This is not to say that quantitative methods do not have a place in tourism, however, recent research has been focused on exploring social interactions and people's reasoning, logic, reflections and motivation for travel (as examples) which more commonly rely on qualitative methods to uncover information.

4.1 RESEARCH METHODS

Informal and in-depth interviews:

As I am interested in the meaning of peoples' experiences and hearing about their travel history, I could not obtain this sort of information through empirical methods, as is often the case in tourism research (Smith 2010). I would like to note that throughout this section I will use the words "semi-structed" and "in-depth" interchangeable when referring to my interview technique as they both refer to interviews in which, "you have one or more topical areas to explore through a series of general questions to ask" according to Smith (2010:109). Following the suggestions of Andereck _et al._ (2005) mentioned above, this method allows the researcher to acquire information first hand, meaning that I was personally able to gather information from the individual CouchSurfers themselves. A semi-structured interviewing technique was deemed most advantageous to the research and was therefore chosen in order to allow for diverse and spontaneous answers to flow from interviewees. Smith (2010) further explains the benefits by saying that, "a semi-structured interview is more ordered than just an open-ended conversation but not as rigidly scripted as a questionnaire" (109). Beforehand an interview guide was prepared (see below) so it could be used as a guideline throughout the interview. Additionally, this way I was able to keep the tone of the interview more relaxed and informal through a more conversational approach, as opposed to a more rigid question and answer time that feels more like an interrogation or test. Just as Bryman (2001) advised, during my semi-structured interviews I was freely able to rearrange my question order, ask follow up questions and ask for response clarification when needed, which made me very flexible when

interviewing.   Smith (2010) contends that in-depth interviews are a very intimate form of human interaction, in which the subject's voice and thoughts are heard; and as I was interested in hearing tourist narratives about experience this seemed to be the most appropriate way of obtaining them. Thus it was my intention to make the interviewee as comfortable and relaxed as possible so that they were inclined to share more/ provide more in depth responses than what the structured questionnaire would allow. I encouraged my interviewees to provide as much detail as they wanted to, and to feel free to include any and all stories or anecdotes that they felt like. Given this, some interviews were short and to the point, while others were longer and included detailed descriptions of people, events, places, things, etc.

Interview Guide

Bryman (2001) notes that typically when conducting semi-structured interviews, the interviewer, "has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an *interview guide"* (438). During my interviews I have employed this technique and created an interview guide to help me. My interview guide (Appendix 1) included questions that I hoped to have touched upon by the interviewees, and it also included a few keywords that I used to help aid my memory. By including key words, I was free to use them to create and shape questions that interested me as the natural flow of the interview/conversation progressed. The length of the interview was of no importance, as long as quality information was provided by the interviewee the time it took to do so was of no relevance.

Questionnaires

When I began researching, I determined that face-to-face interviews would be the most beneficial for my research. However, after contacting potential interviewees I was confronted with two scenarios in which a face-to-face interview would not be possible. These two participants were extremely eager to help and wanted to be interviewed, but unfortunately they were both away from the region on business for an extended period of time. Nevertheless, they both graciously offered to answer my questions via e-mail communication. Given this situation, I thought it wise not to turn down any data and instead decided to turn my interview guide into an open ended questionnaire that I was able to attach to an email and send to the

respondents. The questionnaire included twelve open-ended questions which asked then respondent to disclose information about their experiences, history, preferences, etc with and about CouchSurfing. Almost all of the questions were followed up with a "Why?", and as Morgan and Xu (2009) elucidate, "this blunt, open-ended question invited [the respondents] to give whatever answer came into their head and produced a rich variety of responses" (223). Additionally, all questions were written in a way as to encourage the respondents to provide anecdotes or narratives that helped to explain or justify their replies. This allowed the respondents to use their own language and to speak freely when recounting their experiences.

Choosing a Sample

As mentioned previously, I sought out to interview people face-to face; not only because it would allow me to observe body language, gesturing while talking, and facial expressions, but I feel that it allows for more personal and deep contact. Given this, I needed to be able to find CouchSurfers within a reasonable travel distance from my location due to factors including time and economy. It should be noted that I myself am a member of the CouchSurfing community and have had a profile on the Couch Surfing website since October 2009. Since I am an active member of the community, I thought it best to get in contact with potential interview subjects through the CouchSurfing website itself. As I mentioned in section three, CouchSurfing offers a wide variety of ways to get involved, a person does not necessarily have to be a "surfer" or "host", one can also get involved in the local CouchSurfing community in their region by attending meetings, parties and get-togethers. Having said that, I thought it best and most practical to search for possible interview candidates through that channel. In the Southern Sweden region of Skåne, CouchSurfing currently has active communities in Lund, Malmö, and Helsingborg, as well as Copenhagen in nearby Denmark. In preparation for this thesis, I attended three CouchSurfing get-togethers in Helsingborg, Sweden in order to get to know the local CouchSurfing community and make myself known. Two of the meetings were held in October 2010; one at a local bar called Mogwai, the second at the private residence of a Helsingborg CouchSurfer. The third meeting was held in February 2011, and was also held at a private residence; however it was hosted by a different CouchSurfer.

Through these meetings I was able to meet people and obtain contact information. Therefore, when I began the interview process I contacted these people first. In fact twelve out of the fifteen face-to-face interviews I conducted were with active CouchSurfers in the Helsingborg community. The remaining three interviewees were with CouchSurfers from other parts of the world, who happened to be passing through Helsingborg during their travels and contacted me via the CouchSurfing website to inquire whether or not I might be interested in meeting up with them for coffee. With all of the interviewees, I first approached them with who I am, what I was working on, and the nature/topic of my thesis and then followed up that information by asking them if they would be willing to participate in an interview with me. All interviews took place between February 2011 and April 2011 and were digitally voice recorded (with the permission of the interviewees). When it came to deciding where the interview should physically take place the only criteria that I had was that the background noise was minimal so it would be quiet enough to hear on the recording. Smith (2010) advises that, "the interview should normally be done in a locale in which the respondent is comfortable" (113). Therefore, I was extremely flexible and left choosing the location up to the interviewee, because I wanted them to choose a place that was familiar to them so that they would be as relaxed and calm as possible. Consequently, interviews took place in a wide variety of locations, including the local public library, various coffee shops throughout the city, two different restaurants, and at Campus Helsingborg.

Interviews were typically held individually, except two cases in which two people were interviewed simultaneously. The first case was with two men who were travelling throughout Scandinavia together, and stopped over in Helsingborg for the day to meet me for a coffee. The second case was with a mother/daughter combo. I had initially scheduled the meeting with the mother, and right before we began our interview, her daughter called and upon hearing what her mother was doing, asked if she could join as well. In both cases, having the two people together was actually quite advantageous. In the case of the two men, they had been friends for a number of years, and consequently knew each other quite well. One of them was very friendly and out spoken, while the other was shy and a bit reserved. Since they knew each other, the more out spoken of the two acted as my aid and helped encourage his friend to

speak more and helped him when he became shy. In the second case, having the mother and daughter together was helpful because in many cases they had been CouchSurfing together and at the very least had shared CouchSurfing stories with each other, so in their case they were able to help refresh each others' memories and collectively they provided a great amount of detail that would not have been available to me otherwise.

Finally, at first glance it would seem that my interviews were a bit one-sided as I only solicited interviews from CouchSurfers in the Helsingborg area, meaning that they were all most likely Swedish. However, I was surprised by the diversity I found within this small region. The breakdown of my interviewees is as follows:

Table 1: CouchSurfers represented

	Male	Female
Sweden	1	2
Germany	X	3
USA	X	3
Austria	2	x
Egypt	1	X
Pakistan	X	1
Lithuania	X	1
China	X	1
Total	**4**	**11**

4.2 ANALYTICAL TOOLS

Inductive Reasoning

I began CouchSurfing in 2009 as I have previously stated, and after two years of CouchSurfing- 'surfing', hosting, meeting travelers passing through for coffee, and attending CouchSurfing meetings in my community I started to become curious. I had noticed (as well as

experienced) the unique interactions that took place via CouchSurfing and questions about things I had seen and experiences began to preoccupy my thoughts. Therefore when it came to approaching this thesis, I had already had some thoughts in mind, and had developed my own (albeit preliminary) ideas and conclusions about the things I had witnessed. It was therefore clear to me that I had taken an inductive approach to my research. According to Smith (2010), "[Inductive reasoning] refers to the collection of specific pieces of information or the observation of specific events, from which general conclusions are derived. Induction tends to be open-ended in that it is exploratory, with the conclusions emerging only as the research unfolds" (13) . Building on that, Bryman (2001) confirms this by emphasizing that, "with an inductive stance, theory is the *outcome* of research. In other words, the process of induction involves drawing generalizable inferences out of observations." (emphasis in original, 11)

<u>*Grounded Theory Approach*</u>

Throughout this thesis process I have been simultaneously both observing and analyzing data as was obtained, meaning that I did not start out with a hypothesis developed from theory, and then set out to either prove or disprove it. Instead, I took a more iterative route in which I found myself zigzagging between data and theory (Bryman, 2001). Given the nature of my research, I decided that a grounded theory approach would be the most appropriate. Daengbuppha, Hemmington and Wilkes (2006), define grounded theory as, "…a flexible, reflexive approach that enables the research to explore the complexity of the visitor-attraction relationship and reflect the subjectivity and multiplicity of visitor experiences" (368). In my research I seek to explore the "surfer"-"host" relationship, and I do this through hearing about individual CouchSurfers experiences and how they talk about them in their own words, meaning that they are definitely subjective. Therefore, a grounded theory approach is quite fitting. In addition to that, "the approach enables understanding to be formed into concepts and theories without a priori definition. The concepts, theories or models, are thus developed from the socially constructed knowledge of participants" (Daengbuppha *et al*., 2006:369). It seems that therefore, a grounded theory approach enables researchers to interpret and

investigate the role individual's play in the shaping of experiences. A further benefit is that it makes it possible for the researcher to construct or elaborate upon theories that seek to explain complex and multidimensional social phenomena such as tourism experiences. (Daengbuppha *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, Thompson *et al.*, (1989) argues that,

> "the interpretive approach essentially identifies "patterns" of behavior but accepts that phenomena are often too complex and changeable to attempt to identify causal relationships at the outset. Because of this the researcher does not enter the field with a developed theoretical framework from the literature, or predefined relationships to test, and the research design is allowed to evolve to reflect the emerging themes and the changing environment during the fieldwork" (as quoted in Daengbuppha *et al.*, 2006:370).

Practically speaking, grounded theory is an analytical approach in which the strategizing is developed in three phases or stages: familiarization, conceptualizing and coding, and enfolding the literature (Mehmetoglu and Altinay, 2006). In the first phase of analysis I sought out to acquaint myself with data collected. Practically speaking this meant that I thoroughly examined and then re-examined the interview transcriptions in an effort to build some initial opinions and reflections of the information that arose (Mehmetoglu *et al.*, 2006). In order to be aware of all the emerging themes and opinions I developed from the stage one, I meticulously took notes throughout the entire examination and re-examination process.

Following this, I arrived at the second phase of the analysis which required the data to be coded. The three types of coding characteristic to grounded theory are open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Strauss and Corbin (1990:61) classify open coding as, "the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data." Dey (1999) as quoted in Mehmetoglu *et al.*, (2006:22) further clarifies the process by adding that "whereas open coding divides the data into concepts and categories, axial coding puts them back

together in new ways by making connections between a category and its subcategories". Lastly, selective coding, "…involved the integration of [categories] to form initial theoretical framework… with attention being given to understanding the inter-relationships" (Mehmetoglu *et al.*, 2006:25).

This proved to be a time consuming and arduous task. First I made a list of every response the interviewees gave to each of my questions or topics. This resulted in a surprisingly large and varied amount of feedback. However, after executing this task I was able to realize and uncover patterns in responses in reference to experience patterns, community expectations, social outlook and personal preferences among other things. After that, I followed the suggestions of Mehmetoglu *et al.,* (2006) and the "data that were initially broken down were then compared and similar incidents were grouped together and given the same conceptual label" (19). In more simplified terms, this required me to identify patterns and overlapping responses/thoughts of respondents. I then labeled these similar responses, and clustered them into similar categories. Mehmetoglu *et al.*, (2006:19), identifies this as categorizing; which is the, "…process of grouping concepts at a higher, more abstract level".

After doing that, I then proceeded to merge categories that I deemed to be comparable from my interview transcriptions and made them into ever bigger groups and then proceeded to create a title that summed up or represented the group as a whole. Mehmetoglu *et al.*, (2006) provides guidelines as to how one should go about doing this. I consulted their work and from there I looked at the themes that emerged in each interview and compared them across the rest of the interviews in an effort to identify common experiences amongst the different respondents. From there I found that two themes emerged from the data groupings I had formed. These two themes included aspects of Authenticity of experience and Intimacy in atmosphere as well as emotion.

Finally, I arrived upon stage three which requires the researcher to compare the uncovered emergent themes (which I have mentioned above), concepts and relationships with extant literature (Mehmetoglu *et al.*, 2006). I consulted previous research and existing theories

in relation to my data to ascertain whether or not my discoveries fit in with the literature. This involved, "asking what it was similar to, what did it contradict and why" (Mehmetoglu *et al.*, 2006:27). A more practical look at my data analysis (including actual findings) will be provided further on in this thesis.

4.3 REFLECTION

Collecting my data proved to be a time consuming task, and did not always work according to my scheduled plans. People although extremely eager to participate in the interview and discuss their experiences, were very hard to meet. People have busy lives and can sometimes let commitments slip through the cracks. Getting people to agree to participate in an interview proved to be much, much easier then actually getting the interview itself. Meeting times were scheduled, re-scheduled, post-poned and then re-scheduled again. With such a technology savvy world, it was often surprisingly difficult to get in contact with people; however in the end all interviews took place. Some interviewees required little prodding, and instead enthusiastically recounted me with story upon story of their CouchSurfing experiences, while others had to be pressed a bit for just a few words. After one interview in particular I learned never to turn the voice recorder off too soon. After a very brief and somewhat awkward interview with a young Lithuanian female (who responded to each question of mine with just a brief few sentences), I ended the interview, turned off the voice recorder and packed my things up to go home. Magically though, as soon as the voice-recorder switched off the shy young woman turned into a social butterfly, and began chatting candidly about her life and CouchSurfing experiences, she ended up walking me almost halfway home before we parted ways. I was baffled by this experience, and unfortunately could not remember half of the interesting things she had told me about her CouchSurfing experiences while walking home. This taught me to stay engaged even after the official "interview" had ended.

Another thing I discovered was that it was also important to keep in mind that "your questions must cover the areas that you need but from the perspective of your interviewees" (Bryman 2001:443). Thus meaning that one has to find a way to get the information they need

without prying or inadvertently leading the interviewee to use the words, or mention the phenomena that you wanted. I therefore was careful not to lead my interviewees into telling me things I wanted to hear, and using language that I wanted them to use. I tried to avoid using academic language such as authentic and intimate unless my interviewees used them first. A further challenge that I did not foresee was that my interviewees would sometimes ask me to tell them about my work *before* I had conducted the interview. I did this as carefully as possible and tried to only give a brief overview of my thesis, and not be too specific because I again, did not want to lead my interviewees, or pre-plant ideas or concepts into their heads. I wanted all of their ideas to be organic. Thankfully in most cases I was asked about the specific of my thesis after the interview was conducted, so I had no reservations in providing them with a full summary of my work.

Finally, on a last note, Smith (2010) cautions that, "while the results of those few interviews can provide rich insights into some phenomenon, such as the meanings of a tourism experience in the lives of your subjects, the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population"(111). Given this, when attempting to analyze my finding and come up with conclusions based on my research, I must be careful not to generalize too much, and instead remember that these are the subjective views of various participants all pertaining to the specific event of CouchSurfing, and may or may not be applicable elsewhere in tourism.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter I will present and analyze the empirical findings. The data was grouped according to patterns that emerged. Thus, the findings will be presented in two groupings, first that which alluded to authenticity, followed by those findings that pertained to intimacy. The sections will further be broken and the results analyzed according to the relevant theoretical literature that was presented in chapter two. A definition that has been adopted from the analysis will be provided for both authenticity as well as intimacy at the end of their respective sections. Furthermore, as was established in chapter four, the empirical material in its entirety has been derived from the semi-structured interviews.

5.1 AUTHENTICITY

As discussed previously, Authenticity has a variety of definitions; like a chameleon changes colors, the meaning of authenticity changes depending on the perspective. From my interviews I have found patterns within authenticity and CouchSurfing, and in order to present my finding most clearly, I have divided authenticity into three components: Local Perspective, Interacting with people, and Hospitality. Each with be explained in further detail, and will be complemented with excerpts from the data. I will conclude the discussion on authenticity by providing a definition created from my analysis findings.

5.1.1 LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

When it comes to understanding people's motivations for choosing to CouchSurf, one response was unanimous: getting the local's perspective. Interviewees noted that when they travel they don't like to simply follow guidebooks, stay in hotels, or do the *"tourist walk"* as one interviewee put it. Instead interviewees asserted that travelling should be about getting to know the local way of life; that is where CouchSurfing comes in handy. CouchSurfing hosts often serve as a source of information, they share their favorite places to go-hangouts, bars, restaurants, and reveal hidden parts of the city like where to find the most breathtaking night views and things of that nature. Another aspect that interviewees mentioned involves finding

places that haven't been *"exploited by tourism"* and places that aren't "staged" representations awaiting tourist consumption, as MacCannell's (1973) describes. One interviewee explained that:

> *"In a hotel situation and when you're in a city as a tourist and going on tourist trips with tour buses, everything is created for you. If you weren't there it wouldn't be like that. That's what I mean, everything is really created for you and I think especially in places like where you go to a country where they have resorts and people travel and stay at the resort and never get outside of it and see the real daily life, real food, real places, real people, and real experiences. So that's what I mean by authentic, like with CouchSurfing it gives you a window into that, how people really live, what their homes are like, what they eat and what they talk about and what they like to do on the weekends and where they like to go in the city."*

For this interviewee, getting to see peoples backstage is of high importance. The typical tourist things like tour buses and all inclusive resorts all shield the tourist away from reality. It seems that CouchSurfers attribute authenticity to more personal experiences. For example, another interviewee believed that when you CouchSurf, *"it's like having a private tour guide and your own special guide book that directs you away from the popular tourist places and towards the best hidden hang outs where usually only locals go. "* Getting an inside look into people's live, seeing how things actually are for people who live in the area is a guaranteed authentic experience for CouchSurfers. This goes along with Cohen (1988) who suggested that for tourists, the deeper the experiences sought, the more keen the tourist will be on embracing "otherness". Which thus means that that the more a tourist seeks the "Other" and wants to experience the "Other" when travelling, the more authenticity becomes significant for that tourist, as I previously stated, the two rise in proportion to each other. Consequently, those tourists who seek the "Other" more feverously will thus have a stricter criterion than those who do not. Given then, it is logical to believe that CouchSurfers have a high desire for authenticity of experience, and they feverishly seek out the "Other" and welcome him and get to know him because for the CouchSurfer, that is what represents or determines authenticity.

While it is true that CouchSurfers typically seek out authentic experiences and desire a glimpse into local people's backstage, private areas; it seems rather implausible that all of these experiences are positive. In fact, after hearing the stories of one interviewee I began to question what happens when someone's backstage life isn't what you thought it would be? Is there such thing as too much authenticity? For the interviewee mentioned, her first CouchSurfing experience was perhaps just that, too "authentic". She revealed that the cleanliness standards of her host:

"…really turned me off from that aspect; I mean I thought if you have somebody come over to your place and stay you straighten up a bit you have you know, there are some clean sheets and even if it's a couch you put some clean sheets over it , and a clean pillow case. And this guy was just like wherever, take whatever you know take the pillows off the sofa, and the sofa was really grungy like a bad worn out IKEA sofa that was like tilting… I was like you know I'm not going to sleep on that."

Her comments about the conditions of her CouchSurfing experience bring up an interesting discussion. For the interviewee, inviting someone to stay in your home means that you must first clean, organize and tidy up in general before they arrive. However, what implications does that have for authenticity? If you clean your apartment before a guest comes, then they do not get to see or "experience" how you (as a host) truly live. Does this mean that what they are presented with is not authentic? On the other hand, in the case of the interviewee complaining of "grungy" conditions, her desire for the host to "straighten up a bit" suggests that what she was presented with was perhaps too authentic of an experience.

5.1.2 INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE

Another concept that interviewees deemed synonymous with authenticity was interacting with local people while travelling. It was seen mostly as a cultural exchange, a way to get to know the place you're visiting and learn more about its culture and how life is. This is something that is highly promoted by the CouchSurfing website, and is a part of the

CouchSurfing culture. For example some respondents have commented that, *"… to really enjoy [CouchSurfing] and to really use it, that's an amazing thing to really meet people."* In other words, in order for someone to get the full value from the organization, one must use it to meet people, not just use it as a way to find accommodation. Another even insisted that, *"that's the point of CouchSurfing anyway – the interaction with the people that you are meeting and the chance to see the city through the eyes of a local."* Building off of that idea, interacting with people is closely linked to the previous concept of gaining the local perspective, they are not mutually exclusive, and most often work hand in hand. For example one interviewee said that,

> *"I believe you can't fully understand a culture if you're only looking at it from the outside, like, staying at hotels or going on the big, popular city tours because you're only meeting other tourists and listening to a scripted version of the culture, or city's background. I mean, you can learn a lot from it, sure, but without talking to the locals and being involved in their everyday lives then I feel you can't really get the true feeling of the culture."*

This reaffirms my previous assertion that CouchSurfers associate personal experiences like interaction with the local people to authenticity; meaning that the more you immerse yourself in the culture of the place you're visiting, and the more you talk to and learn from the locals, the more authentic the experience is. One interviewee avowed that for him, his sole purpose in life was to meet new people and interact with them. He claimed that*, "…even if I'm going to stay with someone, I'm not staying there because I want to save money, I'm staying there because I want to meet this person, I want to spend some time with them, I want to share even a few days of their life with them".* In this respect, CouchSurfing is not about saving money, it's about the fact that every person is a whole new experience, and sharing a small portion of someone's life even for a short while is a genuine experience. This helps to prove that authentic experiences are indeed facilitated through CouchSurfing, these experiences are in a large part shaped by the hosts with whom these experiences are created with and by. This again, follows closely in line with what Cohen (1988) suggested, and CouchSurfers embrace the

"Other" by interacting with people and sharing life with them, because CouchSurfers have a high desire for authenticity. Additionally, authenticity of one's experience relates to the degree in which a person is involved in their setting. MacCannell (1973) supports this by affirming that authentic experiences are desired by tourists, and helps to motivate them. For example, instead of going to Brazil and watching local Brazilians at a café, or hanging out in a bar, etc., tourists want to instead go to Brazil and actually be sitting at the café with a Brazilian person, or hanging out in a bar with Brazilians as part of the experience, not just observing or gazing at them from a distance as an outsider. This falls in line with Wang's (1999) "Existential" type of authenticity which results from the tourist activity itself. So when applied to the previous scenario, authenticity is derived from the actual activity of sitting at a bar interacting with Brazilian people.

5.1.3 HOSPITALITY

An additional way authenticity is manifested is through the notion of hospitality. Typically when one travels a person can stay overnight in a hotel, motel, hostel, or bed and breakfast, just to name a few. There, hospitality (i.e. a room/bed, bathroom, food, friendly greeting upon arrival/departure, etc.) is provided in exchange for monetary compensation. Hospitality is purchased by the visitor, typically for financial gain by the provider. This is how the modern hospitality industry works. In stark contrast to that is CouchSurfing.org, and the nearly 3 million members who voluntarily offer to provide hospitality to travelling strangers for absolutely no monetary compensation. Instead most CouchSurfers do it in order to interact with people from around the globe and spread cultural awareness and understanding. No matter how novice or veteran someone is to CouchSurfing, people's unwavering hospitality is really something surprising, and *"…to meet such beautiful, lovely, and generous people"* is just *"magical"* to experience, as one interviewee confessed. She further went on to say that, *"you would never have any idea that people could be so nice and giving"*. One interviewee, upon being asked how she would describe CouchSurfing to a stranger, replied that it is, *"Pure Humanity. It's like a religion I'd say. It's my religion. I really believe in the beauty and the*

pureness of people that want to communicate. People want to really reach out and to know other cultures". In other words, the interviewee is describing her interpretation of the hospitality she has received while CouchSurfing. Usage of words such as *pure/ pureness* and emphasizing that people in CouchSurfing really *want* to reach out, all hints to the concept of genuineness and legitimacy. This falls in line with O'Conner's (2005) thinking, when he suggests that hospitality is inherent in human nature, and people can suspect when the hospitality presented is not genuine. For the interviewee, genuine hospitality was detected from her hosts, and because of that she felt the experience to be more authentic. Another interviewee replied (to the same question) that,

> *"it's really a cultural exchange you know, it's not a place for moochers [freeloaders]. It's a place for people to be willing to share where they come from, and just like a really positive environment and it's just like the deepest form of hospitality I think".*

Here the interviewee illustrates that hospitality is all about reciprocity and that in order to receive hospitality, one must be willing to provide it as well; people cannot merely expect a free couch to stay on. The interviewees attributed this generosity and kindness of people to authenticity. People genuinely want to get to know each other and share and exchange cultures with another. They don't want money, they do it out of the goodness of their hearts, and because of this, the experience holds more value, and is more authentic than someone who received hospitality but had to pay for it. This again, falls in line with O'Conner (2005) who suggests that an inherently genuine hospitality is present in human nature and when it's absent or fake, it is noticed.

The interviewees in the data presented an almost utopian idea of genuine hospitality by emphasizing how their hosts welcomed them into their homes, etc and expected nothing monetary in return. In contrast to this, Lugosi (2009:399) presents a thought provoking argument when he asserts that, "participation or inclusion in hospitality is always conditional: Within hospitality transactions, hosts have duties to ensure the well-being of their guests, while guests have obligations to respect the rules of the host and to reciprocate; both are subjugated to the hospitality transaction and to the creation of hospitable space". As has been established,

no such thing as genuine/pure hospitality exists, and this is true in regards to CouchSurfing as well. Although no money is exchanged, when CouchSurfing the guest is still expected to contribute something (whether it be cleaning or helping tidy up around the house, making dinner, engaging in conversation/sharing knowledge with the host, etc.). In conclusion, it can be said that although CouchSurfing does provide genuine hospitality in the eyes of the interviewees, this viewpoint is not without questioning and challenging.

5.1.4 DEFINITION

To conclude the discussion on authenticity, I have collected my interviewees varying perspectives and opinions about authenticity, and after reading through my interviews and analyzing the data exhaustively, I have created a definition of authenticity based off of what they have said:

Authenticity is being immersed in a culture through interacting with people who are local to the destination you're in. It's about being welcomed into someone's home (or private space) and sharing life with them- including food, favorite places, etc. and it involves connecting with people on a personal and intimate level.

With this definition I contribute to the general knowledge about authenticity within academia. Furthermore, this definition is specific to people's opinion of authentic experiences when CouchSurfing.

5.2 INTIMACY

Intimacy is complex and multifaceted; it can manifest itself in many different ways depending on the situation. Therefore I have divided intimacy into three components in order to more easily explain it. From working with the data and analyzing interviewee experiences I have found that when it comes to CouchSurfing experiences, three important facets of intimacy have emerged: Instant Intimacy, Trust and the "other", and intimacy deficiency. Each of these

three facets will be explained in further detail, and will be complemented with excerpts from the data.

5.2.1 INSTANTLY INTIMATE

CouchSurfing is an extremely unique way of bringing people from all over the world together. The interactions that take place between people are dynamic and the types of connections people make are limitless. Sometimes CouchSurfing connections lead to life-long friendships, and sometimes they remain confined to the one experience that was had. In any case, the nature of intimacy between hosts and guests cannot always be easily defined or categorized. Given this, many people at one point or another during the interview commented on the unusual speed in which they felt comfortable and close with their host and/or guest. An example of this quick intimacy can be observed in the data, one interviewee stated that:

> *"They [her hosts] made me feel like a long-term friend who had known them forever because of the way they treated me. I felt comfortable, as if I wasn't a tourist or visitor at all, and that's what made it special."*

For this interviewee, the typical time and space constraints that normal friendships are built from was not relevant. The awkward and formal "getting-to-know each other" stage of friendship was completely bypassed here. This quick and instant intimacy that people experience while CouchSurfing is extremely unique and challenges the way friendship and intimacy are perceived. Generally speaking this type of intense intimacy is typically the result of a friendship built over a number of years. Bialski (2007) suggests that "friendship today is not reliant on the duration of contact between two people, but on the level of intimacy achieved" (53). Therefore, it does not matter how long you have known a person, and in what context; what matters is the connection you make, the experiences you share, and the emotions you feel with that person. This signals a need to rethink the way we view intimacy. Stowkoski (2002), as previously mentioned, paints a similar picture when he affirms that people's lives are accounted, "…in relation to others and in relation to the meaningful places created and contained in one's surroundings" (373). It can be argued then that, personal meaning, emotions

and feelings are what are important when measuring intimacy, not time and duration. Bialski (2007) terms these quickly forming friendships as *post friendships*, where people are influenced by neither time nor space, while still achieving a level of intimacy that usually is only experienced between lifetime friends.

However, this may lead to some confusion as to how these instant friendships that give way to intimacy are facilitated. If time is not an important factor for intimacy then what is? Generally speaking, relatively unfamiliar people don't often get invited into a person's private/backstage life, especially in tourism because when the encounters are limited by time and often cultural differences; but in CouchSurfing this is exactly the case strangers are welcomed into the private home. Home is something personal and private, and when you invite someone into your home, you in turn invite them in to see your personal and private space. For Bialski (2007), the home sets the stage for intimacy to occur or be experienced between people because it is "…entrenched socio-historically in emotional meaning of authenticity, privacy, and intimacy" (60).

Another interesting topic that builds off of this quick intimacy and that has been echoed throughout the interviews is the idea of CouchSurfing enabling people with similar philosophies, lifestyles and interests to meet and interact with each other. It has been suggested by many interviewees that because CouchSurfers are "*like-minded*" individuals, intimacy can build more rapidly than in other scenarios. One interviewee confessed that CouchSurfing or, *"…the concept is so inviting, like we said before there are these open minded free thinking generous people and they're out there and they restore your faith in humanity, that there are people who aren't so afraid."*People can find and connect with people who are just like them and this allows for a quick and dynamic (non-sexual) intimacy. As one interviewee asserted that, *"because CouchSurfing is a certain lifestyle, it's an alternative lifestyle not mainstream, so people are usually looking for other unusual adventurous people";* CouchSurfing connects people.

5.2.2 TRUSTING THE "OTHER"

It goes without saying that trust and intimacy go hand in hand, Andersson Cederholm *et al.,* (2010:17) confirm this and in their research assert that trust is a dimension in the intimate experience. Layder (2004) further explains the connection between intimacy and trust, he contends that:

> "Intimacy has to be created through the efforts and 'negotiated' agreements of those involved. To be intimate, people have to 'open up' emotionally and be vulnerable to each other, and this require trust. However, trust is only possible when it is accompanied by sincerity; only then do we feel safe enough to confide in each other. Trust of this kind may be formed in but a few hours of meeting someone for the first time, or it may require months (or longer) to develop. However long it takes, a willingness to trust each other 'emerges' out of the communication between those involved. They have to persuade each other by conversation, argument, behavior, expressed feelings, and attitudes that they are indeed trustworthy. In other words, intimacy has to be earned and achieved through interpersonal contact over time… Trust and vulnerability, then, are preludes to intimacy" (as quoted in Bialski, 2007:48).

Intimacy is built and fostered through trust; therefore it is not my meaning to belabor a moot point. However, when it comes to CouchSurfing, trust and intimacy have a bit of a twist, and thus merit a second look. In the CouchSurfing community intimacy is quick, and therefore trust has to be instant as well regardless of the fact that it is between two complete strangers. CouchSurfing is a community heavily based on trust; Bialski (2007) considers the process of opening oneself up to another individual deemed trustworthy, quite a special and memorable process. In order to welcome a stranger into your home you must have some degree of trust in them, and to reverse that, to willingly plan to spend an evening in the home of stranger requires a sufficient amount of trust as well. Without this significant amount of trust CouchSurfing would not work. It seems that when one joins the CouchSurfing community, one immediately becomes a part of a network of trust. Trust is implicit. As one interviewee quoted above said, *"…CouchSurfing is a certain lifestyle, it's an alternative lifestyle not mainstream, so people are usually looking for other unusual adventurous people"*. In that sense, everyone who joins the community is "unusual" enough to accept the idea of being welcoming to strangers and that perhaps serves as a basis for this trust. Some interviewees had this to say about trust:

"The first time I CouchSurfed I was amazed to see how genuine, caring, and trusting my hosts were. It was in Amsterdam, and as soon as we arrived they welcomed us in to their lovely home and even gave us a key to their apartment. I mean, and they had never met us before; we'd only spoken on the CouchSurfing website a few times to confirm our travel plans. So we were shocked when they gave us a key."

"To let a stranger into your home, like when I went to Geneva the first time I was CouchSurfing, within five minutes of meeting the girl she showed me where she kept her spare key and I was like just so struck by this sense of trust that I was really touched, I was like kind of overwhelmed… it's something rare to find in America, and I think that we are so blinded by this fact that, you know our parents are always like don't trust anybody! But one of the coolest feelings I've ever experienced was when I, you know, trusted a stranger and when a stranger trusts me and I can stay with them and feel safe".

CouchSurfing is redefining how trust should be viewed. Instead of shunning the "other", and fearing the stranger, he is instead welcomed with open arms into the private home without so much as a blink of the eye. As children we have been warned since infancy not to talk to strangers, to avoid them at all costs and to fear them. However, when taking part in CouchSurfing one must engage themselves in a sort of "brain re-programming" in order to train themselves to do the exact opposite- welcome strangers, they are friends. Many interviewees have contributed this sense of overwhelming trust from strangers as another way in which quick intimacy is created between two CouchSurfers, because trusting someone is a huge component of being intimate with them.

5.2.3 INTIMACY DEFICIENCY

Intimacy is an important component when CouchSurfing. Having said this, the level of intimacy that exists between host and guests can make or break an experience. When intimacy is felt, the experience can be really personal and meaningful, however, when intimacy is not

established between host and guest the experience tends to be less than favorable. When I asked interviewees what their favorite CouchSurfing experience was, every person attributed good experiences with the connection they had with their host/guest. So it's not too surprising that when asking what interviewee's least memorable/favorite CouchSurfing experiences were, I was recounted with stories about host/guests who did not want to interact with their fellow CouchSurfer, and who did not try to make a connection with people on the more intimate level.

For example, one interviewee revealed that with one guest that she hosted, *"It was not really like he was a CouchSurfer, like a guest who was excited, he was treating it a bit more like a hotel, and… he wasn't really active in trying to have a good conversation".* This is a very clear presentation of CouchSurfer expectations. According to the interview, CouchSurfing guests should be excited about being there, and should partake in conversation whether in the form of cultural exchange, or even just to exchange bits of knowledge. The interviewee presents the guests lack of participation and enthusiasm as a disappointment of sorts. Mirroring this, another interviewee expressed that her host, "…*was just giving a couch to strangers, but it was not more… I tried to talk to him but there was no connection, no person"*. This again highlights CouchSurfer expectations. When going to stay with a CouchSurfing host in their home, it is expected that some degree of interaction between you (the surfer), and your host will take place. When this host/guest interaction fails to take place, disappointing and unfulfilling experiences arise.

It seems that for CouchSurfers experiencing intimacy, letting someone into your private space, and sharing life with them are all major components to having a positive or "authentic" experience. Bialski qualifies this by asserting "modern public life is a matter of formal obligation that seems non-authentic to us, while private life is the realm in which we attempt to behave in an authentic manner, to be 'true' to ourselves" (2007:60). Consequently, when the host does not share the "back-stage" in MacCannell's sense, and when intimacy is not felt with the host or guest, and when the person does not want to open up, be part of a cultural exchange and share life with someone then the experience holds less value, is less meaningful and hence, less authentic.

5.2.4 DEFINITION

What is intimacy? After reading through my interviews and analyzing the data exhaustively, I have created a definition of intimacy based off of what interviewees have said:

Intimacy results from experiencing someone's private space. It is built from trust and sharing common interests/ outlook with a person. It often builds quickly and is intense, and involves sharing your life and culture with someone new.

Intimacy is an important component when having an experience. When intimacy between host and guest is felt, the experience is positive and memorable; and when intimacy is lacking, its absence is felt and thus affects the quality of one's experience. Furthermore, CouchSurfing challenges the current ways in which we view intimacy, and perhaps calls for a rethinking of its definition.

6. CONCLUSION

The concluding chapter of this thesis will highlight the important findings that have emerged from the research, as well as answers to the presented research questions. The dynamic relationship between authenticity, co-creation and intimacy found in CouchSurfing will be presented and detailed. Finally, this chapter will discuss some of the limitations of the work, and will conclude by presenting suggestions for further research.

The aim of this thesis was to explore how co-creation is associated with authentic experiences in tourism, in order to do this; I used the host/guest interaction facilitated through CouchSurfing to explore the relationship. From my findings I determined that authentic experiences are intimate, and most often involve interaction with local people in an attempt to understand and spread cultural awareness. It has also been determined that authenticity and intimacy work concurrently with each other. They both mutually influence each other.

Intimacy is a contributor to authenticity meaning that, when things are intimate between host/guest, the experience feels more authentic than compared with an experience involving little to no intimacy between host and guest. Working off of that, intimacy can often be measured by the feeling of authenticity one experiences, meaning that experiences are deemed intimate when they feel authentic, and vice versa. The two phenomena are not mutually exclusive and they seem to build and contribute to each other. However where does co-creation come into the picture? How does it fit into all of this? Through my research and analysis I have found that *Co-creation helps make an experience authentic;* and since authenticity and intimacy have a causal relationship as I explained previously, it can then be said that, a co-created experience is built on or facilitated through authenticity and intimacy. I have illustrated their relationship below:

Figure 2: Relationship between Authenticity, Co-creation and Intimacy
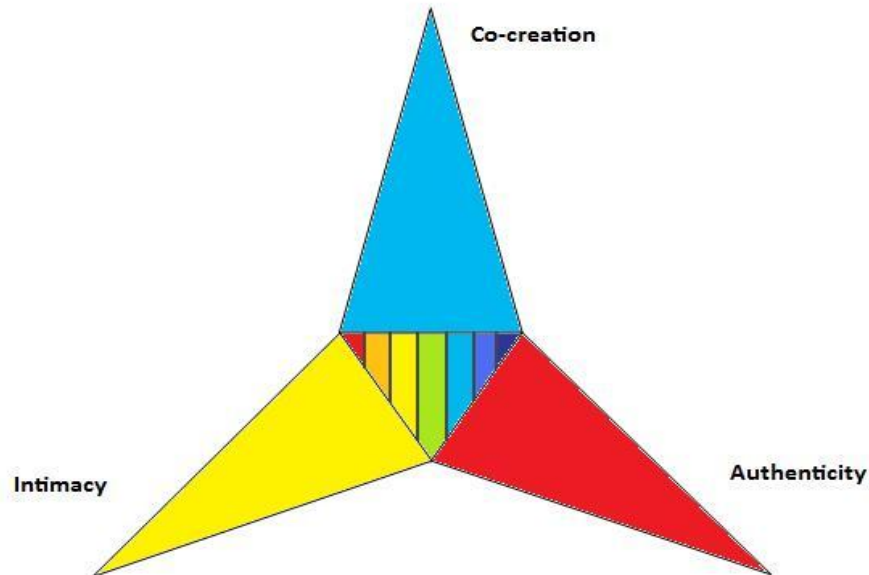
My research has revealed that these three phenomena have strong influence on each other, and they are all very closely related. The very center of the diagram, the rainbow portion, represents the relationship between the three phenomena when it comes to CouchSurfing. As I explained previously in section five, the findings section, Authenticity is derived from interacting with locals, getting the local perspective, and sharing life with people; all of which require co-creation with people to achieve. Tourists want to co-create their experiences by partaking in them with locals. It is through this interaction or co-creation with locals that authenticity of an experience is derived. Through my research I have found that tourists want to co-create and engage in experiences, not stand idly by and watch things happen. This is what Wang (1999), considers as *existential authenticity*, or the authenticity of "being"; in this context, authenticity, "is derived from tourists' participation in the event rather than from merely being spectators of it" (359). In the article Wang suggests this in regards to tourists partaking in a traditional cultural dance, however I feel that what happens between

hosts and guests while CouchSurfing constitutes the same reality. Using the example I mentioned earlier, this means that tourists are actually sitting at the table with a local in a café, instead of watching the locals sitting at the table in the café from merely an onlookers perspective. In the order to have an authentic experience, a person must interact with people, they must co-create, experiences are not one-sided. This correlates with the views of Wang and Cohen when they speak of a constructivist approach where authenticity derives from the actual experience not from an observed object, for CouchSurfers it is the authenticity of the experience that is important, not anything else. In the end it's all about personal experiences, and the feelings, emotions and meanings that individuals ascribe to them. This affirms the conclusions of Cohen (1988), and Wang (1999) who in that in the end, concede that authenticity is subjective and different people ascribe different meanings to each and every experience, therefore no two experiences can ever be alike and no one person can ever determine the authenticity of another's experience.

Additionally, since authenticity and intimacy are so closely related, it can be assumed that co-creation and intimacy influence each other as well. If co-creation helps make an experience authentic, and intimacy is a foundation for authenticity, than it is logical to conclude that intimacy helps facilitate co-creation. When people are comfortable, trusting, and welcome a stranger into their private space, it often sets the stage for intimacy. And when people are intimate with each other both verbally and spatially (Bialski, 2007) they open up and share their life with each other, they co-create together. Trauer *et al.* (2005) argue that, "a place or space to which a tourist is being introduced by someone with intense, longitudinal experiences of, and association with, creates a level of intimacy to which a 'normal' tourist would never be exposed" (482). Considering this, it is logical to argue that tourists and locals are linked through emotions and connections that arise from interactions together. Intimacy allows for meaningful co-creation, and meaningful co-creation gives way to authentic experiences.

In conclusion, while researching and writing this thesis I stumbled upon many different and interesting sub-topics and questions, many of which I would have liked to explore further. However, due to time limitations, I was unfortunately not able to pursue these topics of

interest. Therefore, I purpose that it could be meaningful and worthwhile to explore these questions, and with this I propose ideas for further research within the field. A deeper exploration of the relationship between CouchSurfing and post-modernity could be worthwhile; Paula Bialski (2006, 2007) has done some research on this topic already. Additionally, Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009) provide many examples (CouchSurfing being one of them) of where they see bits of co-creation appearing in tourism; it would be interesting to explore these other examples and in turn compare the results, and further expand upon co-creations influence in tourism. Finally, a study comparing experiences of CouchSurfers with that of more traditional tourists in the same destination could prove to be fruitful in exploring the true differences between the modes of travel and to observe how people's perceptions of authenticity manifest themselves therein.

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8. APPENDIX

How did you first start CS'ing?

Why do you CS?

Do you prefer CS'ing to other more traditional means of travelling like hotels, hostels, etc? If so, can you please explain why?

Can you tell me about some of your favorite CS'ing experiences? What made them special?

What was your worst or least favorite CS'ing experience and why?

How would you describe/ explain CS'ing to a friend?

Would you recommend CS to a friend? Why or why not?

When you host CSers, what do you do with them? Do you recommend places to go/see? Do you show them around your city? Do you hang out with them?

As a CS guest, how often do you find hosts who are willing to spend time with you and show you around? Can you give any examples?

Do you ever keep in touch with past hosts/guests that you have stayed with or hosted?

How do you choose a host and/or guest? Is it by location (like proximity to downtown, or sights of interest) or is it by profile?

What kind of things do you typically talk about with your host/guest? (Everyday common things like what you do? Where you are from? Etc., or is it more deep and personal things like philosophy, personal outlook on life, etc?)