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COUCHSURFING AS AN EMERGING TOURISM BUSINESS AND MARCEL MAUSS' THEORY OF EXCHANGE

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Abstract: The research addresses a social practice mediated by a virtual social network called Couchsurfing. The objective was to identify the main interests and motivations for travel using the Couchsurfing network concerning Marcel Mauss' exchange theory. This cross-sectional descriptive research with a qualitative approach used a non-probabilistic sample, applying unstructured in-depth interviews focused on three segments of subjects: visiting travelers, hosts, and tourists. The results pointed out the close relationship between recognition and retribution, essential elements of the operation of Couchsurfing accommodation. Complementary aspects of multiculturalism and security, which emerged in the research as a fundamental part of the emerging model, were analyzed, concluding with the evidence of the existing relationship between the exchange theory and the operation of this type of accommodation. **Keywords:** Hosting; Collaborative economy; Social network; Tourism; Couchsurfing.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a social phenomenon that consists of activities people engage in during their travels and stays in places different from their usual residence, for leisure, recreation, vacations or other motives. In addition to this, tourism is a job-creating activity that results in economic contributions to social and cultural development at the local, regional, national, and international levels concerning the various tourism products they offer (Ramalho Feitosa, Tolentino, Pedroso, & Gianacáiro, 2019).

The so-called tourism product, according to Santos (2002), is shaped by natural, artificial, and human attractions; therefore, the tourist product is a set of tangible and intangible elements of the establishment, services, objects, infrastructure, and tourism-related activities in a proper environment

rooted in cultural values aimed at satisfying and exceeding the needs and expectations of visitors and tourists.

With the increasing individualism in the last decades, human beings become fragmented; nonetheless, simultaneously, as social beings, they need connections, which leads them to seek intimate and meaningful bonds in the act of travel. It represents a paradox of postmodernity: freedom fosters individualism; however, it brings forth solitude and emotional deficiency, which are remedied through reintegration (Sierra M., 2019).

Despite that, Mas (2015) emphasizes that even though communities are becoming increasingly ephemeral -occasional- the appreciation of others and the strengthening of social bonds remain essential. The same author asserts that a community finds its authentic foundation in an interweaving of 'giving and receiving' activities within a context of interest and responsibility among its members, who uphold and take pride in being part of this particular dynamic, still and all, is this a dynamic specific to a society or can it be practiced in a tourist activity?

In a globalized world, tourists discover new tools and travel possibilities, often relying on social networks or websites where they find other travelers' opinions regarding lodging, entertainment, food, and beverage services, on which they decide whether or not to utilize them. As a result, accommodation alternatives have evolved to depart entirely from the ordinary, creating brand-new experiences (Skyscanner, 2013) and opening up the possibility of travel to diverse visitor profiles, thus altering travel history.

One of the technological agents that enabled the spread of such social behavior was the Internet. In tourism's specific case, the use of social networks targeted at travelers asserting that the novelty lies not in access

to the diversity of information available throughout the Internet but in the search and modes of managing said information, making it more attractive (Domínguez et al., 2012).

Tourism 2.0 uses common platforms, which are interconnected with a network system. Knowledge and its circulation serve as the engine of said network, which self-organizes and evolves through systemic feedback from its members; consequently, tourism systems cannot be considered linear; they act in a complex, dynamic, uncertain, and unpredictable manner, being influenced by both direct and indirect elements of tourism activity, such as cultures, politics, social, natural and human resources. Maintaining its function requires differentiated management with monitoring and social learning to adapt to changing scenarios (Pérez & Willian, 2008). Consider this a significant opportunity in tourist destinations to provide emerging tourism activity alternatives that cover the new normality's need.

It is undeniable that there are increasingly more social networks and websites offering rental spaces as an alternative form of traditional accommodation on diverse destinations, representing more economical and authentic options compared to hotels and their nightly room rates. Not many years ago, technology began connecting guests with hosts; apartments and houses became more appealing than hotel rooms (Revista Factor RH, 2021), simultaneously inviting tourists to learn more about the place's local culture. This is a critical element of the virtual social network: "Couchsurfing" which will be explained upon later.

Under the new business models, Mexico has seen increased options for providing accommodations with household amenities. This has presented established hotel professionals with unexpected competition, undoubtedly affecting their economic

indicators and revealing a new evolution in tourist lodging services.

As Neul Rogan, the Global External Communications Manager at Amadeus, has affirmed, "The success of the travel industry depends on our collective ability to adapt, innovate, and collaborate to make travel easier, safer, and more perfect than ever" (Hosteltur, 2021, p. 1). He even stated that once the COVID-19 pandemic is under control, entrepreneurs and employees will have demonstrated the efficacy of remote work. This will be advantageous for the latter due to the ease of working from any location with just a device equipped with a webcam and connected to Wi-Fi.

This same study reveals that more than 80% of each traveler asserted that technology is a factor that increases their confidence in future travels. Specifically, contactless technology, not person-to-person, but through an official platform, will generate this confidence. Another revealing statistic from the same survey is that 68% of travelers wish for the economic impact they generate to remain within the community they visit. Thus, the demand for locally oriented-travel will increase that same year (Hosteltur, 2021).

More websites are offering rental spaces as an alternative form of accommodation. Nevertheless, what is the primary motivation for using them? How different are they compared to those selling rooms in a traditional hotel? Do they pose a threat to the hotel's operation? These innovative marketing options have become quite popular, with the most appealing advantage being cost savings on room rentals.

The world of the Internet and technology is unstoppable, as it is in constant development and an increase in applications for leisure, recreation, work, and more. Society cannot envision a world without technology and, therefore, without social networks. This

phenomenon, which revolutionized the global population in the 1990s and early 2000s, is an integral part of life, from creating a profile or identity (Guerrero et al., 2017) to distributing information or visual content. These elements, in one way or another, motivate the Surfer (traveler or tourist who stays in a space offered through the Couchsurfing platform by a host) to choose the option to register on the network and travel in a dynamic of recognition and future reciprocity that leads to having an active and growing network.

The term “social network” conceptualizes web-based services that allow individuals to perform three main actions: create a public or semi-public profile within a delimited system, establish a list of other users with whom they share a local or global connection, and, finally, view and navigate their list of connections and those made by others within the system. Although networking on these sites is possible, it is not the primary practice in many of them. What makes these sites unique is not that they create spaces for people to meet strangers but that they enable users to articulate and extend the visibility of their social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Subsequently, upon joining a social network, individuals are asked to complete forms containing a series of questions to generate a profile. This series of questions typically includes age, location, interests, and an “About Me” section. These sites also usually encourage users to upload a profile picture. Furthermore, some sites allow users to enhance their profiles by adding multimedia content or modifying the appearance of their profiles (Ascanio, 2007).

The concept of a social network is a term that has gained particular relevance over time due to its constant use through electronic communication platforms (Guerrero et al., 2017). The cornerstone of collaborative tourism is the network of networks, the

Internet, which connects multiple supply initiatives with potential users through virtual information exchange platforms. Specialized websites, acting as intermediaries, connect individuals offering their lodging, transportation, food services, and more to potential travelers. The numerous advantages include direct interaction, reducing the chain of intermediaries, and allowing for lower costs for the tourist, who has access to more affordable accommodations. The counterpoint is reliability and security because this system lacks robust legal coverage (Mireles Betancor, 2021); users perceive an increase in insecurity, which is generally acceptable.

Online social networks represent a resource that companies increasingly turn to to fulfill their objectives, such as advertising, customer service, brand image, and personnel recruitment (Castelló, 2010). It is important to recall that the early precedents of social networks, evoking sites like Metroflog, MySpace, Messenger, and even the most famous social network today, Facebook, all serve the same purposes of producing and sharing content, thus expanding the possibilities of social relationships (Ramirez, 2021).

Social networks are a tool constantly used by the global population, spaces where experiences are shared with the possibility of being viewed and where one can also see the experiences of others. These networks facilitate communication with others, and as they evolve, they gain relevance. This is how companies project favorable opportunities by making use of them (Tovar Aguilar, 2020). Speaking of accommodation entails discussing hospitality, which involves various variables that create a positive experience. These variables include safety, physical comfort, psychological comfort, trust, interactions, social relationships, the building of bonds, fraternal welcome, professionalism,

and warmth, among others. These elements are reciprocally experienced between guests and hosts (Araújo et al., 2013; Derrida, 2000; Innerarity, 2017; Nailon, 1982).

In this context, the creation of the network known as Couchsurfing was founded, significantly altering how users search for and experience lodging. Couchsurfing involves individuals or groups' voluntary and temporary movement for leisure or other purposes, fostering interpersonal, social, economic, and cultural relationships. It comprises a global community aiming to exchange hospitality services and hosts in their residences (Ascanio, 2007). It is a contemporary practice that seeks profound personal experiences linked to happiness (Farias Stern, 2009). This practice is made possible through access and registration on the site. Under these conditions, the tourist is regarded as a guest rather than a stranger, according to Bialksi (2012).

The Couchsurfer (a user of the network) seeks an exchange not only of accommodation but also of culture, knowledge, discovery, and local information from a local person. The significant advantage is that the accommodation is free, in a home, offering experiences that a tourist staying in a hotel would typically miss out on (VidaCaixa, 2020). It is, therefore, a global online hospitality community where registered members can find contacts in the places they wish to visit and stay in their homes for free or host travelers from anywhere in the world using the same system.

Viewed from a vacation model perspective, it has been typologically classified as a collaborative model. This model is based on the exchange of services, with two variants: (a) involving an economic transaction or (b) through an agreement without money. In the English-speaking world, it is referred to as peer-to-peer (P2P), and in Spanish-speaking

countries, it has become widespread under the concept of shared or collaborative tourism (Mireles Betancor, 2021).

The Couchsurfing system operates by correlating three main components: physical verification, personal references, and entertainment. The website www.couchsurfing.com is a social network for people who wish to spend the night in someone else's home without the obligation of making a payment. The network began in 2004 and has grown globally, currently comprising a community of 14 million members (couch surfers) in over 200,000 cities worldwide, with 10.4 million experiences conducted through this type of lodging (Couchsurfing, 2022).

The founder of Couchsurfing, Casey Fenton, defines the platform as a global network of welcoming individuals where members share their hospitality with travelers or local hosts to learn about their culture. He also suggests that it is a vehicle through which people can go beyond their limits and break down financial and psychological barriers that prevent them from exploring the world and learning from others (Sierra & Bacigalupe, 2020).

Thanks to Couchsurfing, travelers from different nationalities, with diverse cultures, customs, idioms, and perceptions of society, converge around the world on a daily basis. Therefore, the website becomes an initial space that facilitates and provides users with a system to meet and interact with people who share the same vision and condition, meaning they want to travel to a new place, thereby fostering a socio-cultural exchange (Ascanio, 2007). Said system also allows for the creation of new social relationships that greatly aid in the process of adapting to a new social environment different from the user's place of origin.

The platform operates with criteria similar to the social network Facebook and establishes

a network of travelers with over 324,000 registered individuals from 220 countries and more than 31,000 cities worldwide. Users offer their residences to host visitors and, in doing so, serve as guides in their city. The network aims to facilitate a cultural exchange where opinions and recommendations about the city and the country being visited are shared. Sometimes, hosts take it upon themselves to show the city, taking tourists to places not typically visited or even inviting them to gatherings with friends. “Those who offer their couch are selfless individuals, opening the door of their home to travelers deciding to visit their city” (EuropaPress, 2014).

The growth of the network has led to offering various options for users, including guides for ladies and guides for gentlemen with tips for a safer journey. In addition, some services have specialized in catering to eco-lovers, vegans, vegetarians, and more, aiming to provide experiences that align with their tastes and preferences. In fact, some families have stayed with other families, making this a group or individual dynamic. Like other travel systems, unforeseen events can occur, which are not always pleasant. It depends on each traveler and each host. Common issues include dirty accommodations, indecent proposals, last-minute cancellations, and some of the most common challenges when using this application (Alonso Mayo, 2009).

The foundation of Couchsurfing accommodation is establishing national or international relationships, providing not only a bed or good food but also a space for sharing with psychological and physiological comfort, encompassing a combination of tangible and intangible factors. In this way, communication becomes an element that contributes to the comfort of the Surfer using the network, emphasizing the feeling of being well-received. Therefore, proficiency in other languages can significantly influence the

number of references a couch surfer receives (Lashley et al., 2010), fulfilling the need for warmth and human connection when hosting a guest (Benedini & Panosso, 2016).

Couchsurfing is an innovative tourism tool that completely changes how people lodge and travel, encouraging individuals to welcome others into their homes as guests or hosts. Technically, as no contractual or monetary connection characterizes the hiring and provision of a service, the creators of the idea of hospitality exchange have established their regulations.

Social changes have prompted a reassessment of tourism typologies in response to new forms of tourism and a reevaluation of the theoretical categories within the discipline, assuming that tourism emphasizes the individual's experience and role in the tourism sector. These changes have emphasized new values such as authenticity (Drumond, 2013), hyperreality, ephemerality, and sustainability (Dujmović & Vitasović, 2015).

Studies in tourism and hospitality often express travel motivations as the foundation for tourism demand research. The international recommendations for tourism statistics by the United Nations (2010) identify observable motivational groups based on activities undertaken during travel, which are categorized into eight groups: a) leisure, recreation, or vacation; b) visiting relatives or friends; c) business or professional reasons, including studies; d) health treatment; e) religious and pilgrimage purposes; f) shopping; g) transit visitors; and h) other motivations.

The Exchange Theory described in Marcel Mauss's work “The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies” (2009a) explains how the exchange of objects between people shapes and constructs personal relationships. Some authors refer to this

theory as the Gift Theory, which is described as the commitment to return (a good or service) to someone who initially provided them (a good or service) as an inherent act of human reciprocity.

As the theory suggests, giving can involve sacrifice and renunciation. The donation of space, time, lifestyle, tastes, and preferences are elements considered by hosts as criteria for accepting or rejecting guests. The obligation to invite people is particularly evident from clan to clan or tribe to tribe (Mauss, "The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies," 2009).

For the present research, it is essential to recognize how tourists' motivational factors can be influenced by the principles of Couchsurfing based on recognition and reciprocity. Hospitality mediated through Couchsurfing encourages, as a collective premise of usability guided by reciprocity, collective motivations that lead to the ability to share life through connections bonded by mutual support and goodwill.

With the above exposition, it is pertinent to understand the evolved social practices in the accommodation phenomenon through new technologies, such as Couchsurfing, and to compare the motivations of the tourist with Marcel Mauss's proposal of recognition and reciprocity (2009a). This involves making the necessary inquiries to the main actors during interviews to answer the following questions: What motivates a person (traditional tourist) to join the network and choose to vacation as a Surfer? What motivates a host in the network to open their personal space to receive a Surfer? Moreover, is there an interest among traditional tourists in experiencing a lodging method like Couchsurfing?

In this context, exchanges between hosts and visitors under the Couchsurfing model develop based on the ideals of giving and receiving (recognition and reciprocity), as

outlined in the Exchange Theory. Considering shared characteristics in both to make the exchange effective, the objective of this article was to identify the main interests and motivations of users and potential users of the Couchsurfing network and travels in a tourist destination such as Cancún, Quintana Roo, Mexico, comparing them with the meanings attributed to recognition and reciprocity in Marcel Mauss's theory within the dynamics of operation of an emerging tourism business like Couchsurfing.

METHODOLOGY

This research had a qualitative approach, encompassing interpretive practices (Nunes & Luce, 2018) to study reality in its natural context and how it unfolds, unraveling phenomena according to the people involved (Blasco et al., 2017). This study aimed to identify the main interests and motivations expressed by travelers and host users of the Couchsurfing network, as well as the opinions of travelers using traditional accommodations in Cancún, Mexico.

Ethnography was the method used, as it allows for a description of the object being studied (Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano, 2006), including the customs, practices, beliefs, places, spaces, and ways of life of societies. It primarily involves observing the society under study in a participatory and distant manner, recording what is seen, heard, and experienced within it in order to interpret it and turn it into a source of data (Murillo & Martínez, 2010; Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia [INAH], 2010). Two fieldwork techniques are recommended for its implementation: observation and interviews (Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano, 2006).

The non-probabilistic sampling method was determined by typicality and convenience (Laville & Dionne, 1999). The selected subjects

were those directly related to the social network and a group of traditional tourists who were readily available and accessible for voluntary interviews conducted during the period from September 2022 to September 2023.

The target population was composed of three different groups of subjects: (1) Surfers, tourists who use Couchsurfing as accommodation in the destination of Cancún; (2) hosts, those who offer accommodation in this destination on the same platform; and (3) traditional tourists, non-users of Couchsurfing. Therefore, three separate rounds of interviews were conducted, each involving three different interview scripts, as shown in Annex 1. Each group consisted of 11 study subjects.

The categories of analysis used for this research are shown in Table 1 and vary depending on the subject under study.

The Couchsurfing social network also served to get to know and select the subjects (surfers and hosts), interpret their online profiles, and observe them virtually. The information was complemented with the references published about the hosts and surfers to detect the extent to which users identify recognition and reciprocity, the main categories of analysis in Marcel's model.

To establish individual contact with each Surfer, Host, or Traditional Tourist, various communication channels were supported by various devices and software. Messages were sent through the Couchsurfing platform, chat, or email for asynchronous communication to invite them to participate in the interviews as volunteers. Sometimes, follow-up calls were made through a communication network using mobile devices.

The interpretive analysis considered the Couchsurfing network's vision, principles, and consistent policies. It was corroborated by studies of hospitality, especially those

based on Marcel Mauss's Theory of Exchange (2009). This theory played a significant role as a resource to support understanding of how exchanges occurred and the possibilities of maintaining social bonds from online interactions to within the homes, metaphorically represented by the 'couch,' in the units of analysis: recognition and retribution.

RESULTS

The results of the interviews are presented in the following order: the demographic profile of the sample, the perceived and expressed Recognition and Reciprocity from the perspective of Surfers, Hosts, and traditional tourists (users of traditional lodging who are not Couchsurfing users); the motivators they reported having toward the Couchsurfing model; and, finally, the positive and negative elements they perceive in the platform.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Each group of study subjects (Surfers, Hosts, and traditional tourists) had a sample size of 11 individuals, maintaining a similar distribution between men and women. Most of them were of Mexican nationality (between 8 and 9 interviewees per group) and aged between 18 and 34, as shown in Table 2.

RECOGNITION AND RECIPROCITY

SURFERS

From the Surfer group, 6 out of 11 have been active on the Couchsurfing platform for over a year, and 4 have between 7 and 12 months of activity. The frequency of using Couchsurfing for accommodation among these interviewees is high, as 5 out of 11 stated they do it semi-annually, and another 3 do it between six and twelve times a year. See Table 3.

Category of analysis	Surfer	Host	Traditional tourist, non-users of CS
Benefits of using CS	•	•	
Negative elements of CS	•	•	
The primary motivator for using CS	•	•	•
Influence of the CS platform on the purchasing decision	•	•	
Recognition of effort	•	•	
Actions/Effort Behaviors	•	•	
Willingness to reciprocate	•	•	
Seniority in the CS community	•	•	
Frequency of CS platform usage	•	•	
CS purchase intention	•	•	•
CS offering intention		•	•
Preferred hosting mode			•
Demographic profile			
Gender	•	•	•
Age	•	•	•
Nationality	•	•	•

Table 1. *Categories of analysis for the use of Couchsurfing.*

Note: CS = Couchsurfing

Frequency of CS use	# of Surfers
Once a year	1
Once a semester	5
Once a bimestre	1
Once a month	2
Other. Only once so far	2
Total	11

Table 3. *Frequency of accommodation use through the Couchsurfing platform by Surfers*

Note: CS = Couchsurfing

Regarding the category of analysis on recognition, the Surfers clearly express a complete acceptance of recognizing the act of receiving them into their homes. They generally mention that it is a significant effort to host people in their own homes, especially when they are strangers. They also manage to provide the necessary privacy. Some Surfers commented:

- [...] Yes, even the host where I stayed was a family. They welcomed me with a basket full of food, typical things from the country. The effort they made to receive these people was a very nice gesture. [...] When they could, they helped me get around the city, introduced me, and explained more or less how things worked. I am very grateful to them (Gerson, Mexican interviewee).
- [...] Yes, I can recognize it. Eh... well, for example, by being attentive, friendly, engaging in conversation with me, asking me questions, asking me about my likes and dislikes. For instance Uhm, they have often asked me what I like to eat, so they can prepare that for me every two weeks, every week and invite me (Javier, a foreign interviewee living in Mexico).

However, some mentioned that there are hosts who are more straightforward in their interactions but not as willing; this is noticeable in each host's attitude.

On the other hand, in the category of analysis regarding retribution, 9 out of 11 Surfers responded emphatically that they are willing to reciprocate for the services received, facilitated primarily through the Couchsurfing platform. The only one who responded negatively was an individual who had just experienced his only trip of this kind; he responded ‘maybe,’ stating that, although he had good experiences, he is aware that there could also be bad ones, so he is afraid that they might happen to him and not know what to do in those cases.

The Surfers who confirmed their willingness to reciprocate emphasized the solid emotional bond they had established with the hosts during their travels, to the point that the friendship endured over time and distance. This was one of the most significant aspects of the interview responses. Both parties sometimes exchange phone numbers and social media accounts to stay in touch. Here are some testimonials from the interviewees:

- [...] as it is a peer-to-peer business model, it is all about good vibes. We clicked immediately, the exchange of cultures was phenomenal, getting to know new customs, a cuisine different from what we are accustomed to, and above all, the hosts’ warmth or their personalities. Meeting people is the most exciting part of this business model, a unique experience and outside the traditional. I hope the day comes soon when I can do the same for them in my country; we already have plans for it [...] (Luis, foreign interviewee).
- [...] yes, because it’s really about providing support. If someone gave me the opportunity, why not do the same or share what we have with others? It’s charming and pleasant, so yes (Daniel, Mexican interviewee).

HOSTS

Among the group of hosts, 6 out of 11 have been active on the Couchsurfing platform for over a year (one claimed to be among the first to start on it); 3 have between 7 and 12 months, and 2 have less than a semester of experience. The frequency of using Couchsurfing accommodation, meaning how often they receive reservations from surfers, is evenly distributed, with four stating they receive once a year, three hosting between 2 to 4 times annually, and three hosting monthly, see Table 4.

Frequency of CS use	# of hosts
Once a year	4
Once a semester	1
3 to 4 times a year	2
Once a month	3
Other	1
Total	11

Table 4. Frequency of accommodation use through the Couchsurfing platform by hosts

Note: CS = Couchsurfing

In the results obtained from interviews with hosts who receive Surfers, Recognition is subtle, as most host Surfers do not expect an obligatory return, as described in the following interviews.

- [...] I feel that traveling right now is very difficult, especially to Cancun, because I reside here, so hotels, apartments, and even Airbnb costs around 20,000 pesos, and it can go up to 30,000 pesos. So, it’s a way to help people who want to travel, who want to get to know Cancun, bring more tourists to Cancun, and boost the economy without affecting their pockets too much, and also giving us a chance to meet, see more cultures, and explore other countries. (Mauricio, Mexican interviewee).

Variable	Surfer	Host	Traditional Tourist	Variable	Surfer	Host	Traditional Tourist
n	11	11	11	Age (years old)			
Gender				18 to 24	6	3	7
Masculine	5	5	6	25 to 29	3	6	1
Feminine	6	6	5	30 to 34	0	0	2
Nationality				35 to 39	0	1	0
Mexican	8	8	9	40 to 44	0	0	0
Foreign	1	2	2	45 to 49	1	0	1
Undefined	2	1	0	50 to 54	1	0	0
				55 to 59	0	1	0

Table 2. Demographic profile of the researched groups

- [...] I think it exceeded my expectations the first time because I was very insecure about receiving a stranger in my home; I do not know; I was not very convinced. However, he was a very nice person, we had a great time, and now we are friends, so I think it was more than I expected. (Diana, Mexican interviewee).

Not all hosts have experienced being surfers, and most of them want to do it in the future. Of the six who said they had done it, half stated that what they received was more than they expected, which is also part of the recognition. Although not prominently, the other three mentioned that the accommodation met their expectations. Here are comments on this line:

- [...] Well, it did not exceed my expectations. It was okay, nothing extraordinary, just interesting to experience meeting strangers in your home (Renato, Mexican interviewee).
- [...] Yes, I had a couch experience a few years ago, and this was the one that led me to think about being a host myself. It was the one that led and motivated me to do it, as it exceeded expectations (Martha, Mexican interviewee).

The Retribution category of analysis by the hosts was almost imperceptible to the interviewees. In all cases, they do not expect immediate retribution for being a host; however, they hope to continue in contact on a reciprocal trip or to travel together to another destination. Additionally, 10 out of 11 will remain active on the platform.

- [...] Of course, they offer us their home, and we are aware that we should also offer ours. It should be a mutual agreement, but they should be clear that everything in life is an exchange (Gregorio, local interviewee).
- [...] If your first experience trying this activity was good, it motivates you to continue. So, we made good friends the first time it happened, so it was like, "Oh yeah, we should try it again," we did it a couple more times, and honestly, they were excellent experiences. So, I was able to meet a friend from Turkey, so when I traveled to Turkey, I already had an acquaintance. So, [...] if you have a good experience, you will continue to try it, you will continue to do it (Diana, foreign interviewee).

TRADITIONAL TOURISTS

Notably, in this group, 7 out of the 11 interviewees had yet to hear about Couchsurfing. Most of them considered the system an innovative idea to interact with people from different parts of the world and enrich shared cultures. Some expressed interest but had reservations about receiving a stranger in their home or staying in the home of someone unknown. Therefore, there is partial evidence of willingness to experience a stay using the Couchsurfing model, and they recognize the courage and selflessness of the hosts in receiving them.

- [...] I would love to be able to travel without paying for accommodation. It is courageous that someone opens their doors to you with almost no knowledge of you. [...] I would behave very nicely, better than in a hotel. I was taught what it means to respect other people's homes. [...] It is good that there are souls in the world whose motives go beyond just the economic aspect. (Leonardo, foreign interviewee)
- [...] I think I have more cons than pros. Because the pro would only be that it is interesting to get to know the culture through someone who is local, right? They can take you to places they know, and you save time researching and have more fun getting to know the area better. However, the cons are that I travel with my family and do not travel alone, so I think it is harder for someone to accept a whole family. Besides, I see it a bit unsafe to arrive at a stranger's place, right? So those would be the cons. (Alicia, Mexican interviewee).

When asked about their willingness to participate in the platform, the majority (5 interviewees) accepted; only three responded negatively, and another three remained

neutral. Most of this group (8) expressed that they usually use the hotel modality for lodging services; 5 said they had done it on temporary rental platforms such as Airbnb or Booking; and 3 with family and friends. The responses of traditional travelers related to the Retribution analysis category demonstrate it as a commitment; that is, the cycle of retribution is not completed until, once the experience as a Surfer is lived, they become the host of a traveler.

- [...] I suppose so; after having stayed at someone's home, I believe I should receive them at my house, but the thought that it will not necessarily be the same person who hosted me makes me think (Heydi, foreign interviewee).
- [...] Because one should be more helpful, think for others; then some people are willing to travel but do not have enough resources, and it would be good help [to be their host] (Erick, Mexican interviewee).

MOTIVATORS TOWARD COUCHSURFING

Among the motivators regarding the platform, the top three were meeting new people, experiencing travel in a different way, and having fun moments. All three studied groups agreed on these.

Hosts and traditional tourists agreed that participating in Couchsurfing is motivated by the promised cultural exchange, enriching anyone's culture, and gaining a deeper understanding of the visited place by being accompanied by a resident. Surfers and traditional tourists coincided in viewing Couchsurfing as a form of free accommodation, suitable for trips with a limited budget for lodging.

Surfers and hosts highlighted selecting the Couchsurfing platform for its user-friendly and intuitive interface, security due to the

detailed information it provides about the Surfer/host, and sharing information before the visit. This includes reviews that facilitate the selection of the host or the Surfer's profile for compatibility.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ELEMENTS OF COUCHSURFING

Surfers and hosts coincided with the positive aspect of the economic value of the experience, expanded knowledge about other cultures, the cultural exchange it facilitates, and the extended networks of friendship. In particular, the Surfer pointed out that having a local companion to show or guide them about the destination's attractions is practical, easy, and allows for a profound experience. On the other hand, the host mainly focused on the increased possibility of visiting previously unexplored places and achieving reciprocity with balance.

Regarding the harmful elements, concerns were concentrated on the uncertainty regarding hosts/Surfers, even with profiles available; both groups may not empathize or be compatible, and the host may omit important information for the Surfer, such as rules, pets at home, types of plants that may cause allergies, among other details. Lastly, the factor of insecurity is perceived in both groups.

In the interviews, two more attributes were identified to consider in using the platform: motivators that should be highlighted to understand the presented analysis categories comprehensively.

SECURITY AND INTERCULTURALITY

- [...] Of course, it's a modality that can have bad experiences such as theft, malicious intentions, and unethical habits; these elements can occur and must be considered when choosing to host a Surfer (Heydi, foreign interviewee).
- [...] I like this network. In addition to the exchange of stay, there is the exchange of culture, getting to know new customs, gastronomy different from what we are used to, and above all, the warmth of the hosts or their personalities. Meeting people is the most exciting part of this world, a unique and non-traditional experience (Luis, foreign interviewee).

With these two additional motivators, the interviewees endorse the explicit intention of giving and receiving, a governing principle in the operation of Couchsurfing. They take special care to note the potential insecurity this business model may present by allowing unknown individuals to enter a home in search of a desired cultural exchange. However, the interviewees accepted the platform, stating it is an innovative business model in the tourism sector.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Following the analysis of the results obtained from the actors in the Couchsurfing practice, the existence of a tourism product with tangible and intangible elements is determined, as Santos (2002) describes. These elements are articulated around an evident axis of cultural exchange of values that satisfies the needs of tourists, visitors, and hosts in a dynamic of mutual pride and appreciation that strengthens human bonds.

Amid global openness, information technologies have served as tools in trip

planning. Social networks have succeeded in positioning emerging tourism businesses for various tourist profiles, which until recently could not be described. The online lodging options search engine is changing the travel story, allowing for almost immediately sharing recommendations and warnings about products and services among other internet users, influencing or being influenced by individuals with similar or aspirational profiles.

The relationships, especially the virtual comments generated in a network, do not lack an element of distrust. However, these types of groupings among users with standard profiles increase the trust index due to the hedonic connection of the members, which, according to Alves (2019), forms the basis for the cohesion of a social group. Recommendations within social networks such as this shape the *modus operandi* of the Couchsurf society, providing evidence of new empirical instrumentalizations that harmonize and minimize insecurity and data confidentiality in this rising social practice regarding socio-cultural exchange between hosts and surfers.

Due to the changing behavior of travelers post-pandemic, emerging businesses have found new customers, attracting followers to new service or product modalities that benefit the visited localities with their economic impact. This is a fundamental principle of Couchsurfing that, while it has found a market niche, is also a new modality that must be monitored in terms of social, economic, cultural, and security aspects.

The accommodation exchange is familiar; collaborative economies have existed throughout travel. What is presented in this case as a novel activity is the way members interact to share reception availability or travel plans through social networks among a select group of internet users, making it an emerging business related to Mauss's theory of exchange.

Based on the associations established with Mauss's studies, it can be inferred that the exchange, in the context of research on Couchsurfing-mediated hospitality, begins when a profile is chosen and a request is made to stay, that is, still online. From there, a commitment to mutual donation is created, revealed by hosts' and guests' awareness or moral commitment to give, receive, and reciprocate hospitality.

It is concluded that the requirements to be part of the community are clear, and the guiding principles of use are also sufficient and public. The option to accept or not accept a visitor involves the right to reserve admission, and the option of reciprocity after being hosted is real. Recognition and retribution are key motivators (for Couchsurfers, regardless of their role) in this exercise and the theory addressed.

The link: Recognition - Retribution in Couchsurfing is permanent, continuous, and goodwill-driven, serving as the primary motivators for users and prospective network users for their travels. In addition, elements such as multiculturalism and security are complementary attributes for an acceptable social dynamic of emerging hospitality. This article aimed to identify the main interests and motivations for the Couchsurfing network and travels among hosts and guests in Cancun, Mexico. It also sought to understand the exchange system between them, using the studies of hospitality based on Marcel Mauss's Theory of Exchange (2009) as a reference.

After conducting the research, it is evident that the practice of Couchsurfing is another lodging alternative, adding to other practices that arise from the evolution of the traveler. This may be subject to future research regarding its growth, continuity, or disappearance.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1. INTERVIEW SCRIPT, GROUP 1, 2 Y 3

Group 1

Guest surfers who do Couchsurfing.

Interviewer:

Explain the purpose of the interview.

Begin the questions:

- 1- In your opinion, what are the benefits of staying in accommodation under the Couchsurfing model?
- 2- What harmful elements exist in accommodation under the Couchsurfing model?
- 3- What is the primary motivator for continuing this form of travel and accommodation through Couchsurfing? There can be several motivators.
- 4- How does the platform influence your choice of Couchsurfing? For example, ease of use.
- 5 - Can you recognize a host's effort to receive you? YES / NO
- 6 - Through what actions or behaviors do you recognize the host's effort?

- 7 - Would you be willing to reciprocate in the same way when someone requests accommodation in your home shortly? YES / NO / MAYBE. Please explain your answer.
- 8 - Gender, Age Range, Nationality, Frequency of Couchsurfing use, Seniority in the community.
 - 8A. Gender: M F
 - 8B. Nationality: Mexican (specify country) Foreigner _____ (specify country)
 - 8C. Age range:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| a. 18 to 24 years old | d. 35 to 39 years old | g. 50 to 54 years old |
| b. 25 to 29 years old | e. 40 to 44 years old | h. 55 to 59 years old |
| c. 30 to 34 years old | f. 45 to 49 years old | i. 60 to 65 years old |

8C. frequency of using accommodation through Couchsurfing:

Once a week Once a month Once a semester Once a year Other _____

8D. Seniority in the Couchsurfing community:

Less than a month 1 to 6 months 7 to 12 months More than a year

9 - Will you continue using this type of accommodation? Why? - The Surfer will provide reasoning for their answer.

Group 2

People (Hosts) who receive visitors (Surfers) in their homes under the Couchsurfing model.

Interviewer:

Explain the purpose of the interview.

Begin the questions:

- 1 - What benefits does receiving a guest in your home under the Couchsurfing model bring?
- 2 - What negative aspects does receiving a guest in your home under the Couchsurfing model bring?
- 3 - What is the primary motivator for continuing this Couchsurfing operation? There can be several motivators.
- 4 - How does the platform influence the decision to accept or not accept a Surfer in your home? For example, references from other hosts.
- 5 - Have you already experienced a stay in the Couchsurfing model? YES / NO (If the answer is no, proceed to question 6)

If the answer is yes:

5A. How would you rate the experience? Did it meet, not meet, or exceed your expectations?

5B. Do you, as a host, reciprocate in the same way? YES / NO / MAYBE. Please provide your reasoning.

6 - Gender, Age Range, Nationality, Frequency of Couchsurfing use, Seniority in the community.

6A. Gender: M F

6B. Nationality: Mexican (specify country) Foreigner _____ (specify country)

6C. Age Range:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| a. 18 to 24 years old | d. 35 to 39 years old | g. 50 to 54 years old |
| b. 25 to 29 years old | e. 40 to 44 years old | h. 55 to 59 years old |
| c. 30 to 34 years old | f. 45 to 49 years old | i. 60 to 65 years old |

6D. frequency of using accommodation through Couchsurfing:

Once a week Once a month Once a semester Once a year Other _____

6F. Seniority in the Couchsurfing community:

Less than a month 1 to 6 months 7 to 12 months More than a year

7 - Would you continue to host Couchsurfing visitors? Why? – The host will provide reasoning for their response.

Group 3

To the guests (Traditional Tourists) who have NOT been users of the Couchsurfing model.

Interviewer:

Explain the purpose of the interview.

Explain what Couchsurfing is.

Begin the questions:

- 1 - Based on your perception, would you like to use accommodation under the Couchsurfing model? YES / NO / MAYBE. Provide pros and cons for your argument.
- 2 - What would be the primary motivators for choosing this form of travel and accommodation through Couchsurfing?
- 3 - On a scale from 1 to 5, how willing would you be to be part of this network that offers you the opportunity to travel to someone else's home, and, in turn, you will have to host others as an act of reciprocity? Elaborate on your response.

Not willing at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very willing

4 - Gender, Age Range, Nationality

4A. Gender: M F

4B. Nationality: Mexican (specify country) Foreigner _____ (specify country)

4C. Age Range:

a. 18 to 24 years old

d. 35 to 39 years old

g. 50 to 54 years old

b. 25 to 29 years old

e. 40 to 44 years old

h. 55 to 59 years old

c. 30 to 34 years old

f. 45 to 49 years old

i. 60 to 65 years old

4D. Name:

5 - What type of accommodation do you use most frequently when vacationing?

a. Hotel

b. Temporary rental. Specify which one : __Airbnb, __Booking, __BestDay.

c. Family and Friends

d. Other (specify which one) _____