

**COUCHSURFING LIKE A NEW WAY FOR TRAVELLING****Семыкина Л. В.**

CouchSurfing(CS) is an Internet based travel oriented social network where the members offer each other free accommodation, company, a wide range of activities while travelling. The idea of CouchSurfing is to bring people of different nationalities together to share their culture and thoughts with each other. This system connects members throughout the world by offering free accommodation with the bonus of the member's company and tips.

There are over a million members worldwide so it is very likely to find a likeminded host and a place to stay during your travels. The network is not only for young people but for anyone who is interested in. There are people of all ages living all over the world offering their company and opening their home to help likeminded members who enjoy getting to know new cultures and lifestyles. The members are of all ages, there are single people as well as couples and even families. Furthermore, their jobs range from students to any occupation you can think of.

Some facts from the history should be mentioned. CouchSurfing was established by an American man Casey Fenton. He first thought about the idea in 1999 after a trip to Iceland. He bought a flight ticket from Boston to Iceland where he sent over a thousand e-mails to randomly picked students from the University of Iceland. He then received dozens of e-mails from people who accepted to accommodate him. On the way back to the United States he started developing the CouchSurfing concept. Mr. Fenton was the inspirer of CouchSurfing but not until 2005 started working full time for CouchSurfing. He was the creator of the original web pages until 2009 using his own computer programming skills.

The network became a for-profit corporation in 2011. It changed to a benefit corporation after being denied tax-exempt. The establishment was also required to use its money for charitable funds. Their goal is not to make money, though they charge \$25 for the verification process, their approach is to serve their mission better as a non-profit corporation. A great part of CouchSurfing is how people connect and share their lives and travel stories. You get to compare yourself with the other members and their experiences. Surfers who continuously stay at other people's houses in a way make the couch their new home.

Today CouchSurfing operates in 246 countries and uses more than 340 languages in 80121 cities. 2.85 million members have been registered and 3.26 million people have had successful Couchsurfing experiences.

**Methodology**

We conducted a preliminary study on the topic "Familiarity of specific Couchsurfing way of traveling". The survey was carried out with students at the Siberian Federal University and with the Couchsurfing web sites members. The purpose was to find out how well the student population is informed about the specific Couchsurfing way of traveling. The aim was to find out the basic attitudes of students at the Siberian Federal University to the specific Couchsurfing way of traveling. The interviews took place between September and October 2013.

For the preliminary study 'Familiarity of specific Couchsurfing way of traveling' we used a combined survey method in two ways. One involved collecting data face-to-face in writing with an oral introduction. The other was on the Internet with a short introduction. The ratio of Internet and face-to-face surveys was 60:40. The questionnaire contains 26 closed and four open-end questions. Respondents did not answer the questions which were not applicable to them. We

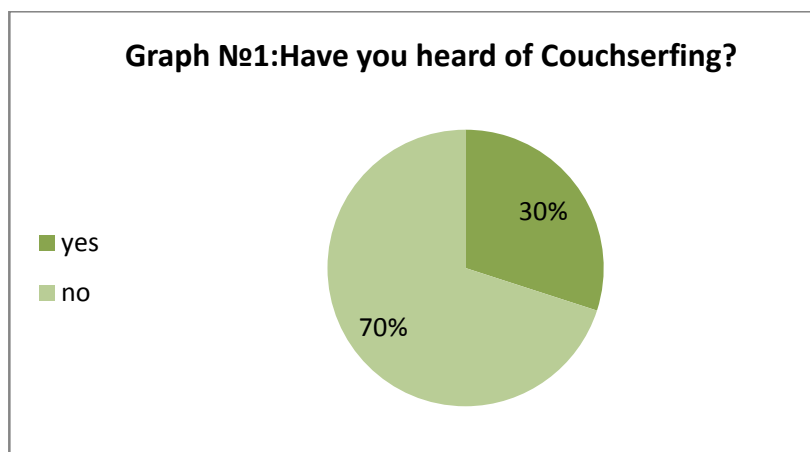
interviewed first group on the point of the general information:attitude to traveling and their life, at the first block of our questionnaire to find out if it is possible to use their answers for our research. A lot of students have no information about CS so we can't use their answers. The both groups were responded to the second part of the questionnaire, where we found out their opinion about advantages and disadvantages of CS.

The survey consists of two parts. The first comprises questions related to Demographics the second includes research into Couchsurfing.

## Results

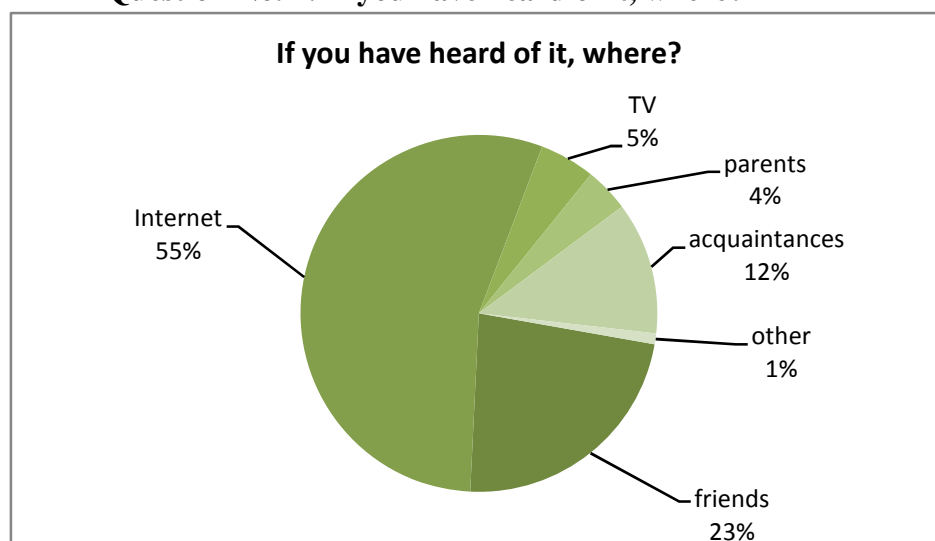
The results of our research are following:

### Question No. 1: Have you heard of Couchsurfing?



The answers to this typical yes/no question show that nearly half of the students are familiar with CouchSurfing (further in the text CS), but as many as 70% have never heard of this social network.

### Question No. 2: If you have heard of it, where?



The answers indicate that the information about CS is mostly spread online (55%), which makes sense considering the fact that CS is based on Internet social networking. It is important to

note that 1/3 of respondents heard of CS through their friends and acquaintances, which can gain be related to the Internet as most of today's social contacts are realized through social networks.

### **Question No. 3: Do you know someone who has traveled in this way?**

The results for this survey question were expected – even though nearly half of the respondents are familiar with the term, a significantly smaller number (only 3%) know someone who used this travel option.

And another question (statistic at the presentation), which allow us to know if this answers important for the main theme of the survey: advantages and disadvantages of CS. The second part of our research we present like a list of recommendations for the future travelers:

#### **Let me speak about advantages:**

**First of all CouchSurfing it is free way to live at another country.** Also you should pay money for use web-site of CouchSurfing, but not for apartment where you will live.

**Secondly, you can really see a country from the local perspective,** not just the tourist's perspective. This is probably the best thing about couchsurfing. It's not really about free accommodation or having a tour guide, it's about connecting people and cultures and allowing you to sort of stand in someone's shoes for a while. You will learn much more about a country and its people couchsurfing than you will in a hotel, or even a hostel.

**Thirdly, it's very budget-friendly.** As I have said above, CS isn't just about free accommodation, it is about connecting people. However, it is obvious that this is a really budget-friendly option: you can stay for free, and often the host will drive you places or provide you with food, too (but it is not obligatory). CS really does have the added benefit of being able to save you a lot of money.

**Fourthly, CS help you to meet interesting people.** Couchsurfers agree that one of their favorite things about this way of travel is the people they get to meet and the pleasant experiences that are created when foreign travelers engage with interesting couch hosts, in many cases resulting in long distance friendships that can last a lifetime.

Following the point mentioned above CS help you to experience new cultures and traditions. For many couchsurfers it's about taking in the cultures and traditions of foreign countries, the kind you just can't experience staying in hotels or even hostels. Many travelers find couchsurfing to be a far more intimate travel experience when being emerged in the customs and beliefs of a local resident.

**Finally, you can discover a destination's hidden gems.** In most cases your resident couch host will be able to give you some advice on the best tourist destinations or even accompany you to some of their most cherished (and sometimes generally unknown) landmarks.

#### **Let me speak about disadvantages:**

One of the most important things is a **safety concerns**. For many travelers the notion of not knowing the host you'll be staying with is a deal breaker, but couchsurfers today can interact with potential hosts months prior to actually meeting. Couchsurfing communities also offer general information and reviews on both couchsurfers and hosts so that the experience is as transparent as possible, giving you everything you need to know before you make the decision to surf or host.

Another important point is a **living standards**. For those travelers who are hoping to stay somewhere that pops a chocolate on your turned down bed's pillow, the chances are that couchsurfing may not be for you. You have to be willing to 'fit in' with the host. Sometimes your host will get up really early when you want to sleep in. Sometime's your host will work and

ask you to stay out during the day. You really just have to be flexible and willing to fit in with these plans. Couches aren't that comfy. Of course, couchsurfing doesn't always literally mean you are sleeping on a couch. However, often you will be sleeping on a pull-out or mattress. Beds are rare.

Lastly, **There's little privacy**. Sometimes when you travel, especially if you're introverted or in a couple, you just want some privacy and to be alone. This is basically impossible when Couchsurfing, and someone is nearly always there.

The main question to the members of CS web-site was: How did they use the web site? Their answers we show as the list of certain recommendations:

There is only one way how to start CS:

1. Go to <http://www.couchsurfing.org> and **sign up**
2. **Create a profile** by filling out all of the information. This is important because users will look at this information when deciding whether or not to host you / be hosted by you
3. Now you can **find a place** where you can sleep. The normal way is to press 'Surf' and then search for the location in which you want to stay. It will bring up a list of people's profiles and you simply click them to see more.
4. **Choose right people**. When you like a profile, send them a Couch Request. Be thoughtful and polite and send out a few requests for each place that you would like to visit. Often people are busy or don't check their messages in time. They may already be hosting at the time that you want to visit. When sending a couch request, you can also check the box that says 'Other nearby hosts can send me invitations to stay with them.' This creates an open request.
5. Chat with the person
6. Meet with your hostel and start to live at their house.

## **Conclusion**

According to the Internet data, CS as the method of travel has already gained the popularity in the Western world, while Russian travelers have just only started exploring it. However the survey has revealed the certain interest to CS. This interest in the aggregate with the CS advantages mentioned above gives us the strong belief of CS popularity among the youth of Russia in future.