The Transformation of Identity and Privacy through Online Social Networks (The CouchSurfing case)

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1. Introduction

The manner in which individuals create their identity as subjects, and how they define themselves, has significantly changed. "There is a growing public discourse (both hopeful and fearful) declaring that young people's use of digital media and communication technologies defines a generational identity distinct from that of their elders" [22]. The level of introspection has weakened. Increasingly, individuals define themselves by what they can show, and what others can see. Intimacy is an important aspect of defining who they are, and thus it must be publicly presented. As Ito et al. found in their research in the *Digital Youth Project,* "new media provide(s) a new venue for their intimacy practices, a venue that renders these practices simultaneously more public and more private. Young people can now meet people, flirt, date, and break up outside of the earshot and eyesight of their parents and other adults while also doing these things in front of all their online friends" [22].

The term identity has become a controversial term in social and cultural theory, partly as a result of processes such as globalization and postmodernization [3]. Also, in terms of cyberculture, the transformative effects of new communication technologies have reshaped identity at an individual and collective level. There has been extensive research on the ways in which cyberspace has redesigned some aspects. For Castells, identity is a set of values that provides a symbolic meaning to people's lives by strengthening both their feelings as individuals and their sense of belonging.

People can have multiple identities, depending on the different contexts in which they exist [11]. Charles Cheung discusses blogs in this context, exploring the ways in which they are used. Cheung borrows from sociologist Erving Goffman the concept of 'drama', which emphasizes the fact that all people interpret roles in the 'drama' of everyday life. For Goffman, interpersonal lives are marked by performance, and life unfolds as a 'drama'. Individuals try to manage the ways that others perceive them, and try to present themselves in a positive way. The home pages of blogs include visual and textual material, and links to other sites, with biographical narrations supplemented with links to relevant sites. This shows the preferences of the individual. Many blogs also use web meters to measure their popularity [12]. As Aced noted, if in blogs the presence and visibility are built on the basis of texts, images and videos, and what transcends on the interests of the blogger, in social networking sites the presence is organized around a closed profile, built by each user and their contacts [2].

Since social networking sites are a recent phenomenon, there is a lot to investigate about

the new types of social interactions that they generate, and how they can be seen to represent the transformation of sociability in the digital age. We will start from the viewpoint that online/offline communities (and CouchSurfing in particular) are a clear representation of the change in values that society is experiencing today, thanks to the facilitation of the internet.

One of the authors of this paper, Cristina Miguel, has been a member of Couchsurfing.org since 2007. This research is positioned within the embodied and situated practices that participation in the site generates. Immersion, combined with online and offline participant observation, and the theoretical research that Cristina Miguel did for her Masters thesis [28] about hospitality exchange networks, form the basis of this paper. Christina has both accepted visitors into her home as a 'host', and she has also 'surfed' to other homes many times.

2. The Transformation of Identity and Privacy in the digital age

"The user is the content" [27], is a metaphor that McLuhan applied to the media in general in 1976. Nowadays, not only do the individual users create a lot of content on the Internet, but on social networking sites all the content is related to the user, so we can say that 'the user is the content of the internet'. On social networking sites, individuals expose their intimacy in public which is a phenomenon that has recently been labeled, 'Extimacy' [34]. New technologies allow for the representation of 'I' to be performed publicly. In previous centuries, intimacy seemed to be the essence of identity, but today, "thanks to the media, personal privacy becomes a part of community participation" [37].

2.1. From the claim of Privacy to exposed Identity

Since its inception, the claim of privacy represented the need to tip in the interior. The subjective experience becomes part of the personal narrative in a time when the individual is released from the weight of tradition and feels ambivalent about the loss of support that it represented, and being disappointed by the uncertainty of the future. The postmodern individual is a subject 'psi', anchored in everyday life, becoming immersed in a continuous self-realization path and concerned with the optimal management of emotions. That is the reason why the territory of intimacy is a product of Western modernity.

At this point, it appears the homo psychologicus [34], who is interested in introspection and self-knowledge. It is promoting a new 'emotional culture' based on, *inter alia*, an ideal of authenticity through the display of intimacy in a blurred division between public and private [4]; [21]. If intimacy was once understood as a bastion of privacy and reserve against the claims and demands of public life, now intimacy is viewed, and exhibited as, an ingredient of social identity. This is in itself a paradox, because what started out as something to be removed and protected from public view, turns into (via technology) an authentic presentation of self that individuals want to display and exhibit. However, as noted by Foessel, "intimacy means all the links that an individual decides to remove from the social space of the exchanges to protect it and develop their experience under the gaze of outsiders" [16]. This implies that intimacy loses its status when it is advertised.

The 'psychological individual' has given way to the 'exposed individual', and in turn, diaries have given way to profiles. Profiles have become a common mechanism to present one's identity. They have been extended to include personal and social information, such as articulated 'friend' relationships and testimonials. As Abrechtslund has averred, "the practice of online social networking can be seen as empowering, as it is a way to voluntarily engage with other people and construct identities, and it can thus be described as participatory. Also, to participate in online social networking is also about the act of sharing yourself – or your constructed identity – with others"[1].

On the other hand, the exhibition of one's identtity can hide a desire for recognition, "the individual claims attention in many ways. Their desire for recognition and for communication has as its ultimate goal in reaffirmation of their identity through promotion of relationship with others"[37]. Danah Boyd argues that "privacy is simply in a state of transition as people try to make sense of how to negotiate the structural transformation resulting from networked media" [9].

The consumption of other's intimacy has increased tremendously over the past few years. The intimate 'I' of the common people is promoted and enhanced in the virtual scenario under the requirement of authenticity and the requirement of 'being yourself'. So privacy becomes entertainment content (in the sense of something shown to others), 'I' becomes part of the show and in this transformation, intimacy ceases to be, as it changes to extimacy [34]. As McLuhan said in 1977: "this has become the main business of mankind, just watching the other guy (and) invading privacy. Everybody has become porous" [27]. The popularity of social networking sites offers users the potential to develop more persistent identities as well as to help individuals produce themselves through identity creation, socialization and self-expression.

The postmodern individual is focused on emotional self-fulfillment, gives priority to the private sphere and reduces emotional investment in public space (abandonment of the political and ideological). "Intimacy and private life become the site of the intensification of relationships with themselves and the other" [36]. On the CouchSurfing case, Paula Bialski argues that one does not observe the individual's desire to experience the private, the 'house', but a need to experience another human being. She has termed this phenomenon as 'emotional tourism'. The origins of emotional tourism are deeply rooted within the processes of globalization, Internet discourse, new social stratification, the Western individualist society and postmodernity [5].

2.2. From networked individualism to *neotribes*

The development of digital technologies has fostered new forms of socialization, such as those that facilitate social networking platforms that have dynamics dominated by concepts such as trust, reputation and visibility. With the emergence of 'Web 2.0' technologies, computer mediated communication has entered a new era of 'networked individualism'. Pre-established relationships (family, friends, work colleagues etc) are located in the context of one's identity online, allowing it to maintain an extensive network of strong and weak social ties [39]. Because of this excessive individualism, as noted by Verdú [37], post-materialist movements arise where it is not important to store objects or knowledge. In a connected society, maintaining the network is of prime importance.

The computerized consumer society enables 'live on demand'. Key values of this society are hedonism, respect for differences, the cult of personal freedom, psychologism, the cult of nature, and sense of humor. It is a narcissistic and 'psi' culture in which cyberspace is a medium where narcissistic communication can be developed. Through social networking profiles and blogs, narcissistic people find a way to indulge their narcissism. The investigation of Laura E. Buffardi and W. Keith Campbell: "Narcissism and Social Networking Web Sites" in 2008, examined how social networks are used to express narcissism and concludes that people who are narcissistic online are also narcissitic offline, and they find on these platforms tools for public exhibition [10]. But we disagree and we state that both technologies and culture invite narcissistic practices.

We argue that in some respects, hospitality exchange networks exemplify this revolution of postmodern individualism that Vidal calls hedonistic hyperindividualism. According to Vidal, postmodern society generates a 'collective narcissism' with the solidarity of a 'microgroup of kindred spirits' [38]. This would explain the cosmopolitan paradox in hospitality exchange networks where links are built between like-minded people, creating a cosmopolitan 'gated community'. The paradox being, a 'gated community' of open-minded kindred spirits [17].

In an individualistic society, giving meaning to one's life through the internal dialogue with one's emotions implies a much harder and uncertain task than when the personal sense of self has already been given in advance by the major producers of meaning frameworks (community, tradition, religion, etc.). This implies that some young people who are disoriented, confused, lost, unhappy, etc., are grouped into urban tribes that function as the replacement of social institutions. In these urban tribes, young people find a way to establish links with one another and obtain a group identity and self-assertion. These *neotribes* are a consequence of disappointment that individuals (in most cases young people) feel as a result of modern day life in large modern cities, where there is superficiality, and where everything seems to be measured by personal success. There is excessive consumption that characterizes the mass consumer society and generates an 'alienation' of individuals [26]. These *neotribes* are also present in cyberspace and we argue that many virtual communities, which create strong links between their members, are *neotribes*.

For online settings such as social networking sites, the most relevants requirements to designate them as a 'community' are, "engaging in shared rituals, social regulation, and collective action through patterned interaction and the creation of relational linkages among members that promote emotional bonds, a sense of belonging, and a sense of identification with the community" [32]. Therefore, CouchSurfing can be considered as a kind of *neotribe* composed of young people (the average age of a user is 28 years) who establish links with each other with an emotional exchange, a shared set of motivations and values, and a sense of belonging to a community. As Devan et al. states, "CouchSurfing offers a new way for people to travel and meet others, posing a working model of a hybrid online-offline community changing the way people negotiate social trust and belonging across geographic and cultural boundaries."[5].

3. Exchanging hospitality on the net – Couchsurfing case

Hospitality exchange networks exemplify many of the transformations of identity, intimacy and privacy motivated by both the new values of postmodernity and the extended use of the Internet. These networks are platforms maintained by volunteers based on trust, good will, openness and tolerance with the aim of bringing people together. They provide free housing and allow members to gain an insight into the everyday life of the member visited or host [24]. These networks operate through cooperation, reciprocity and trust between hosts and guests, and are intended to provide non-monetary exchange of hospitality. As a condition of membership of the community, it is expected that the members be both hosts and guests, although there is no requirement to perform both roles to be a part of it [20]; [25].

The first hospitality exchange networks emerged after World War II to promote peace among people [21]. One of the oldest, named Servas, is still active today (www.servas.org). In the nineties many hospitality exchange networks focused on specific groups: for cyclists, for women, the gay community, for hitchhikers, etc. Most of them still operate today and its database is available through its website. During the last decade, with the ever increasing use of the Internet, many hospitality exchange networks have been set-up as general web projects, creating communities through the Internet.

In January 2004, Casey Fenton (along with other co-founders) started Couchsurfing, a social networking site with a system that enables a user to identify and find someone to provide sleeping space in their home for free. CouchSurfing creates a hybrid online/offline community where members coordinate travel accommodation with other members, organize gatherings for cultural exchange, and create a global cooperative network. The site remains non-profit and is supported entirely by website member donations and an address verification system [30].

While Couchsurfing was not the first 'hospitality exchange site', it has become the largest, with a membership that counts over two million users. Unlike most social networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace or Orkut, where you first connect to known others by 'friending' them [7], Couchsurfing does not have this function. On the contrary, CouchSurfing consists of a group of strangers from all corners of the world who can see each other's profiles, and make requests to stay at someone else's house. "CouchSurfing goes against many common social norms, as people are welcoming strangers into the privacy of their homes" [14]. Using an internal messaging system, individuals (called *couchsurfers*) can contact potential hosts and request a 'couch'; part of a narrow code of vocabulary specific to the site; an example of how "a symbolic code can aid in the identification of who belongs to a certain social space and who does not" [40]. Rather than being either online or offline, the process by which hospitality is 'exchanged' is a complex 'dance' of emails and telephone calls, that ultimately leads to face-to face encounters, and overnight stays, that normally last between two and seven nights [5].

3.1. Motivation to join the network

We can distinguish between psychological, functional and social motivations [23]. Among the psychological motivations are: recognition, curiosity and personal growth. On the other hand, people with functional motivations use the community as a source of information,

seeking advice about where they should travel, finding a place to sleep for free, increasing flexibility on their travels, and finding interesting things to do in their place of destination. Finally, social motivations include a desire to interact with local community members, to host other members (or be hosted), to have a cultural exchange, to attend meetings organized by groups, and to make friends worldwide.

One may consider that revealing private details on social networking sites (such as Couch-Surfing) may be a risk, considering the fact that you make contact with total strangers. However, despite this concern, information is willingly provided. The question that arises from this is, what are the motivations to show private data? As Gross and Acquisti have pointed out, "different factors are likely to drive information revelation in online social networks. The list includes signalling, because the perceived benefit of selectively revealing data to strangers may appear larger than the perceived costs of possible privacy invasions; [...] faith in the net-working service, or trust in its members" [19]. But in CouchSurfing, not only do users reveal personal information such as telephone numbers and addresses with their potencial guests, they also share their intimacy with them when hosting them. "When members host they have much to gain but also much to lose, such as personal belongings, intimacy, personal space, etc." [14]. Receiving a stranger at home is always a risk, but here users value more the experience of knowing someone foreign, having a cultural exchange, and the potential for long-term friendship, rather than the potential danger or damage that the stranger could cause them.

In order to generate trust between users, CouchSurfing has designed a reputation system. After hosting or being hosted, *couchsurfers* are encouraged to leave a reference in the host's or guest's profile.

3.2. Reputation and trust: the importance of references

Trust, says Resnick, is generated first by interacting with someone over time. The history of past interactions informs greatly about the suitability of the other person. Secondly, the expectation of reciprocity (or retaliation) in future relationships creates an incentive for good behavior. Reputation systems provide records of members and they bring visibility to the past actions of all other members. Interactions in the future can be established on the basis of these reports of past behavior. This form of interpersonal monitoring of the conduct of members of communities both online and offline, as in the case of CouchSurfing, reports when individuals behave well as hosts or guests and will penalize those that do not [33].

Trust and reciprocity are crucial to the effective functioning of hospitality communities. As noted by German Molz, "hospitality is always a risky proposition, since the host can become a parasite, or even worse, the enemy" [17]. Therefore, the websites of the hospitality exchange networks seek to circulate trust as a way in which to ensure security at the meetings between members. The most comprehensive security system operating on these websites is the 'reputation system'. Reputation systems are like shortcuts to establishing trust between strangers in online environments.

In order to build trust among members, CouchSurfing has developed a security system, which is characterized by several components: personal references, verification and vouches.

The most important safety system is *personal references*, which allows members to rate each other after meeting, through a comment posted on their respective profiles. With the

written record, the experience can be specified as 'positive' 'negative' or 'neutral'. There is a trend of leaving positive references between users, and when the experience is not positive normally they don't leave any reference. "Individuals adjust their friendship ratings because they can see how others rate them" [35]. Only when there has been a really bad experience do *couchsurfers* display a negative reference. The *verification system* gives members the option to confirm their identity and physical location. In order to do this, members fill in a simple form which states their name and address. It also requires a donation of $ 20. The CouchSurfing team then sends a postcard by mail with a code that the user must enter in their profile. Once the process is finished, a green padlock appears on the user's profile. The Green padlock symbol on the member's profile indicates that the address has been proven and that users are who they say they are, because by paying by credit card donation, the user's personal data is checked. Finally, in the *vouching system,* users can only vouch for members who they have met in person. Confidence is gained when a user has been vouched by three other people. When someone is vouched, this implies a high level of trust in the community. The study of Teng et al. shows that the vouch is reciprocated 70% of the time [35].

Online technology-mediated reputation systems based on transactions that are socially contextual (from Ebay to Couchsurfing) have come to play a pivotal role in society and everyday lives, accumulating evidence over time as to one's character and personality. The number of vouches and reputation testimonials establishing a person's status, trustworthiness, consistency, commitment and participation makes it difficult to fake. The reputations garnered on Couchsurfing carry a permanent archive of past contributions and actions, acting as permanent reminders, a particular narrative, and a consistent identity [30].

In the comprehensive study conducted by Paula Bialski about trust in CouchSurfing, it was observed that levels of trust declared by the users via their profile, to rate their CouchSurfing 'friends', are high, as shown in Figure 1.

	Percent
I don't know this person well enough	6.7
I don't trust this person	0.4
I trust this person somewhat	11.5
I generally trust this person	34.3
I highly trust this person	34.7
I would trust this person with my life	12.3

Fig. 1: Levels of trust in CouchSurfing Source: Bialski, 2010: 198

A major concern regarding the exchange of hospitality is that registration is done online, and anyone can become a member. Thus, there is no way of knowing whether the information provided by a user is correct. The survey carried out by Heesakkers (12) in 2008 shows that in order to rely on a host, or a guest, a combination of the following security measures are used:

- The amount of information in the profile and originality
- References
- The level of verification
- If a member has been vouched or not

Also, Farias' research results match with Heesakkers', in that with increased provision of information, the level of fear amongst members decreases. Profiles with more information and user photos are the most trusted. According to Farias, although there is a safety concern, we see the characteristic of the postmodern citizen who is not willing to sacrifice their freedom to feel safe. Thus, the interaction with foreign countries, cultural exchange and integration between people are the means to pursue happiness [15].

In the following section we will analyse the CouchSurfing profile, what information is published and how personal identity is constructed through the profile. Profiles are the digital identity of their members, and because members don't know each other in advance, as in Facebook or Orkut, they are the center piece of hospitality exchange networks.

4. Representation of the identity through the profile

Profiles allow individuals to construct a digital identity because they allow users to share a lot of information such as interests, hobbies, ideologies, etc. with other users. On Couch-Surfing, as well as on most other social networking sites, each new user is required to build a semi-public profile, a kind of card that provides the 'I' to other users in the network.

The key information provided when creating a profile is:

1. Personal description
2. How I participate in CouchSurfing
3. CouchSurfing experience
4. Interests
5. Philosophy
6. Music, movies, books
7. Types of people I enjoy
8. Teach, Learn, Share
9. One Amazing thing I've seen or done
10. Opinion on the CouchSurfing.org project
11. Locations travelled

Paula Bialski points out that all the profile key questions are crucial to build trust and familiarity. In order to create context and mark identity, the majority of users add pictures, description of places they have lived and travelled to, and links to other friends on their profile. Dan, a founder of CouchSurfing, explains that the profile questions are structured so that they "capture the essence of people. And the display of the people's essence contributes to build trust"[6]. The profile helps users to know each other. As the CouchSurfing website states: "those who see your profile have a better idea of who you are. The information con-

tained in the profile helps other users to know who you are in terms of what you write and how you write it" [13].

CouchSurfing's user profile has a list of friends, where other people in the community that the *couchsurfer* knows are reflected. They are catalogued as: best friend, good friend, friend, CouchSurfing friend or acquaintance. It also has a reference list, where users leave a comment on the people's profiles they interacted with [8]. Bialski notes that a large number of friends and referrals helps to build confidence. However, of equal importance is the kind of friends that you have. For example, a user that is an ambassador, but who has relatively few friends, will generate a high degree of confidence. Users who are very involved in the CouchSurfing project can become 'ambassadors'. It is a title given by a person in the administration department of CouchSurfing. Ambassadors are responsible for promoting the idea of CouchSurfing and sometimes perform other tasks, such as translating the website [6].

In their research, Devan et al. found that "as length of membership in the community increases, there is a parallel increase in the amount of contact with other members. This positive relationship leads to the accumulation of references, friendships, and social capital that helps members build a positive reputation; however, this may decrease one's need to continue to engage in instrumental moves that bolster their reputation. On the other hand, new members may feel a greater need to strengthen their profile, or increase their status"[14].

While the profile allows users to express different aspects of their identity [7], a reputation can only be created through testimonials, vouches and (friend) connections to other users of the network. These can only be obtained by offline participation in CouchSurfing. Through the CouchSurfing website, users can convey their identity through interaction, participation and exchange, and in the same way gain status within the community [30].

Testimonials are viewed as simply one more feature of verifying identity. Yet, through testimonials, profiles become a site of conversations. Testimonials represent the primary form of public conversation between *couchsurfers*. Even though some users do not respond to reciprocated testimonials, most of them continue with the cycle. Technically the testimonial is between the author and the receiver, although it is equally intended for third parties. Therefore, the profile, the connections, and the testimonials which are visible to all, exemplify a social network that is designed for consumption by others [8].

The process of displaying your personality online is important for the future development of a relationship *offline*. In Couchsurfing, establishing the 'self' *offline* is done in two ways: firstly, individuals present a live profile of themselves, presenting their interests, their skills, and their likes and dislikes. This profile resembles their *online* Couchsurfing profile (for example: 'I speak 3 languages and I love cooking). The second way of establishing the self is by telling stories. The fluidity of modernity leaves the individual without an exact definition of self. Therefore, the more monologue and dialogue individuals have concerning themselves helps them to assert themselves and to verify who they are as people [5]. Giddens would blame it all on the reflexivity of modernity, explaining that the construction of the self is a reflexive project. This narrative and presentation of their profile is part of their reflexive project, and is now instantly available through online social networks [18].

5. Conclusions

On social networking sites individuals construct their identities on their profiles through the intersection and interaction of their own ideal representation of the self (what they want to show), and with what 'the other' thinks about them as expressed through testimonials. In profiles, digital identities are conversational identities. We argue that in the current networked postmodernity, the individual, through social networking sites, is (re)shaping a networked identity, what Zizi Papacharissi has labeled, a networked self [31], created through interaction and intended for the consumption of the networked public.

Enabling both identity expression and community building, online social networks are the tools designed to facilitate sociability, and at the same time, they are blurring the private and public boundaries. We consider that the concepts of privacy and intimacy are changing as they are being reshaped by the forces of postmodernity and new media.

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