

Sharing Private Space with Strangers: The Phenomenon of Couchsurfing App User

<http://dx.doi.org/10.25008/jkiski.v6i2.576>

Gita Juniarti

Post Graduate of Communication Science, Universitas Diponegoro
Jl. Erlangga VII No. 33, Pleburan, Semarang 50241 - Indonesia
Corresponding author: gitajunn@alumni.undip.ac.id

Submitted: June 19, 2021, **Revised:** September 21, 2021, **Accepted:** October 11, 2021
Accredited by Kemristekdikti No. 28/E/KPT/2019

Abstract

Couchsurfing is an application that connects persons who need lodging, with individuals who offer their house as a free place to stay. Persons who need lodging are called surfers and individuals who provide their house are called hosts. When hosts and surfers are just getting acquainted through the Couchsurfing app, they hold some uncertainty with each other. This study describes the experiences of both parties in their efforts to reduce uncertainty and build close relationships, even though they only met through digital applications and never face to face. This study uses a phenomenological approach with data search techniques in the form of in-depth interviews, direct observation, and data observation through the Couchsurfing application. The number of interviewees was 14 from various cities in Indonesia. To reduce uncertainty and build close relationships, hosts and surfers go through five stages; first, understanding and believing technology; second, pre-conversation; third, online conversation-1; fourth, face-to-face conversation; and fifth, online conversation-2. The description of these stages is summarized in the findings of this study. This finding also proves that the presence of technology may modify the previously known theories of interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication not only takes place between two people directly but also involves technology as an intermediary.

Keywords: Couchsurfing app, uncertainty reduction, technology, close relationship, phenomenology

Introduction

A house is a part of someone's and their family's privacy. In general, people are willing to share part of the space in their house with other people with whom they are closely related, such as close friends. Whereas for strangers, they are only allowed to visit up to a certain limit, for example, up until the terrace for the room limit and only until 6 pm for the time limit. Indeed, it is more difficult to share a private place with strangers than people with whom they are intimately related.

Nowadays, the boundaries of privacy are disappearing because of the presence of the

internet. The presence of various mobile applications and social media erases distance from one another. Adolescents who met in cyberspace do not hesitate to get to know each other, exchange personal information, and expose themselves to new people (Anderson et al., 2017). It is easier for people to find their way in everyday life with the rapid development of the internet including ways to share their house with strangers they just met (Guhr et al., 2020).

Applications that support individuals to share their residence began to grow and become popular among the public. One of them is

Airbnb. AirBnB's system is to rent out a house or room, and renters make payments according to the price listed in the application (Mao et al., 2019). This shows that the Airbnb app offers cash benefits from stays. Apart from Airbnb, other apps rely on sharing a place to live, exchanging personal belongings, or making money by helping one another. For example, Zipcar and Craigslist, which these applications do bring benefits to hosts and people who need their service. The hosts get a monetary advantage, on the other hand, their privacy may get threatened by those strangers staying at their house. The house, which is part of someone's privacy, lost its privacy due to strangers occupying it. Airbnb, Zipcar, and Craigslist are just a few of the platforms that expect multiple feedback, such as cash, workers, and sharing entities. This phenomenon has developed over the last ten years (Schor & Vallas, 2020).

In Indonesia, one application that is popular and in demand among young people to share their house with foreigners is Couchsurfing. It is unlike Airbnb, which makes living space transactions for cash, Couchsurfing does not put a price on the exchange. Couchsurfing users may provide free rooms to stay for travelers who come to their city and need a place to stay. As long as the traveler has a Couchsurfing account, lodging matters become much easier. The system of Couchsurfing questions the form of reciprocity obtained by the inn provider. If travelers get benefits in the form of free lodging, then what about the benefits for the lodging provider? The form of reciprocity is abstract, such as a network of friendship and kindness in return (Juniarti, 2021), but how can they form trust, the close friendship, and sharing the residence, if they never met at all? It makes Couchsurfing users interesting to research more.

Couchsurfing members are divided into two groups, namely the surfers group and the hosts group. The surfers group is travelers, while the hosts group is people who provide lodging for surfers. Surfers may make requests to stay with the hosts. If the hosts do not object, then they will press the 'yes' button to accept the surfers' requests (Juniarti, 2021). The interesting thing about this research is the relationship between hosts and surfers, who know each other only through Couchsurfing intermediaries. Hosts and surfers do not have a close relationship. Building new friendships and sharing private space should be difficult for them. So do surfers request to stay in a hosts' house that is still a stranger to the surfers.

To that end, trust between hosts and surfers must be established. In 2011, the Couchsurfing app was considered an exciting breakthrough, especially for young people. Hosts coordinate with each other through the application to provide accommodation for traveling surfers who require free lodging. Couchsurfing members may also arrange meetings with fellow members in the city to share stories, experiences, and information about traveling (Rosen et al., 2011). This activity reflects that Couchsurfing is more inclined towards friendliness apps than free lodging applications. Furthermore, in 2020, the residence sharing system in Couchsurfing generates very complex beliefs between individuals who know each other through cyberspace (Schor & Vallas, 2020). These complex beliefs are caused by the awareness of cases of harassment, rape, and even murder in the name of Couchsurfing. The case occurred due to introductions and meetings between surfers and hosts through the Couchsurfing application. Couchsurfing users have experienced rape and murder in Italy and Nepal (BBC News, 2015; Kaplan & Bashyal, 2015; Kirchgaessner, 2015).

The hosts who provide lodging and the surfers who will stay are two strangers who do not have a close relationship. They only connect and get acquainted through digital media which is Couchsurfing. The hosts may share their private space, although they only introduce themselves and contact surfers through the Couchsurfing app. They have never met before and do not have a close relationship with each other. In other words, they were strangers who became acquainted through Couchsurfing.

Trust and close relationships that are built between hosts and surfers through the Couchsurfing application are the phenomenon that will be analyzed in this study. The formation of trust between two strangers who are acquainted is influenced by various personal factors, including benevolence, competence, and integrity. For young people, benevolence has the greatest influence on the formation of trust in face-to-face meetings (Firmansyah et al., 2019). This trust may be the basis for individuals to establish a more intimate relationship. One indicator of someone starting to trust and establish a more intimate relationship with the other person is self-disclosure. Disclosure of information and private stories, ranging from telling about family, experiences, plan for the future, love stories, and other privacy matters (Dickson,

1986; Rizal & Langerya, 2021; Sherly et al., 2019).

This study aims to develop a concept about the establishment of trust and close relationships that may be created between people who are connected through digital media. They get acquainted and establish close relationships through digital media, then they share their private space when they meet each other. The activity of sharing living space with people known through the internet certainly carries risks.

Theoretical Framework

In a first-time meeting, both parties who are just getting acquainted will ask questions and keep uncertainties about the other person. One part will analyze the interlocutor, such as what their name are, where they came from, and so on. Questions and answers between one part and others took place to reduce the uncertainty between them. The description is under the theory used in this study, namely Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT). URT theory contextualizes the actions taken by hosts and surfers in reducing uncertainty between them through digital media. Anyone, including young people, will, of course, feel wary when getting acquainted with any stranger, including those they met through digital media. Young people repeatedly rethink and reassess their interlocutor before deciding whether they will continue the relationship or ending it right there (Kelly, 2000).

Based on the URT theory, individuals will make plans to achieve the desired goals. They will formulate a plan to obtain detailed information about the stranger they are talking to. The more information they obtained, the less uncertainty they will have about the other. The lower the uncertainty, the less alert the individual will be (Morissan, 2018). After getting that information, individuals need a lot of consideration before they take the relationship further into a more intimate one. When the other does not share the same goals, hobbies, and commitments, it will be difficult to continue the relationship. Even though they do not cut ties, they keep their distance from each other. This system is called natural selection in friendship (Christakis & Fowler, 2014)

The studies above discuss the formation of friendships through face-to-face contact. A friendship between two individuals who are acquainted through social media begins with a chat sent to the other person. The chat is aimed to reduce uncertainty (Wang & Edwards, 2016).

The next stages of further introductions are the same as people who get acquainted through offline meetings. They will give the questions and answer to decrease the uncertainty of each other. However, there are 'spaces' that distinguish introductions in cyberspace and offline meetings (Wang & Edwards, 2016). The 'spaces' is Couchsurfing application, where the hosts provide a place to stay for surfers they have just met through Couchsurfing.

When getting acquainted with people in cyberspace, individuals may not pay attention to the style of speech, clothing, and appearance of the interlocutor in the first meeting. Individuals may only pay attention to their profile picture and identity displayed on a computer screen (Martey & Consalvo, 2011). It could be that the profile picture and identity are fake or not entirely true. Real-world friendships are long-lasting and of better quality than online friendships (Aken, 2016). This is due to the high expectations that individuals have of online friends, so when they meet in the real world, they turn out not to be as expected, resulting in psychological impacts such as frustration (Firmansyah et al., 2019). In addition, there are often misunderstandings between two individuals regarding the meaning of messages conveyed to each other through chat features on applications and social media. This is due to the presence of 'spaces' that limit communication, resulting in misunderstandings (Gómez-Urrutia & Tello-Navarro, 2021). The presence of technology as 'spaces' for encounters, reduction of uncertainty, and the formation of close relationships will be examined in this study.

The next theory used in this research is the theory of social penetration. This theory is to see the steps taken by the hosts and surfers after the uncertainty between them is reduced. Social penetration theory assumes that every individual has the common sense to choose the right action when interacting and establishing intimate relationships with others. Individuals may choose people whom they feel may provide positive benefits for themselves so that individuals will be more open and willing to open close relationships with people who provide these positive benefits (Griffin et al., 2019).

Material and Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research methodology and a phenomenological approach to understand the life experiences of research subjects when undergoing an event and how they interpret the event (Flowers & Larkin,

2009). This research was conducted from February 2020 to May 2020. The locations of the research are in several cities in Indonesia.

The subjects were fourteen people with various characteristics. They live in different cities, namely Bandung, Jakarta, Serang, Cilegon, Palembang, Jambi, Pangkal Pinang, Bontang, Balikpapan, Semarang, and Ungaran. In addition to various domiciles, they also have different occupations, ages, and marital statuses. These informants consisted of seven female informants and seven male informants. The range of their age is between 21 and 32 years with occupations such as students, accountants, civil servants, entrepreneurs, sales and marketing officers in the property sector, freelancers, supervisors in paper mills, dentists, public relations officers in retail companies, and junior high school teachers. They also have different living conditions, such as living alone in a boarding house, living alone at the house, living with a partner, living with a family consisting of a father, mother, brother, and sister, and living in a place of business with their employees.

The technique of searching data is using in-depth interviews, direct observation in the field, and observations through digital media. The author creates a Couchsurfing account and acts as surfers in this study. The author submits *request to stay* with the hosts in these various cities. While moving from one city to another and meeting the research subjects, the author took notes and documentation in the field. The notes and documentation started from the chat between the author and research informants through the Couchsurfing application, then recording their behavior and speech when they met directly with the author. The notes are part of the observations in this study.

Data management begins with transcribing the interview, then writing exploratory comments in addition to the interview transcript. After that, the writer grouped the comments into emergent themes and the emergent themes were reduced to superordinate themes. For the formulation of superordinate themes, the grouping is like archiving documents according to their respective folders. Documents that have similarities will be put together in one folder. The results of the superordinate theme will be reported in the results and discussion (Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Kahija, 2017).

Result and Discussion

Based on the results of interviews with 14 informants, they had different motivations when they decided to use Couchsurfing. Those motivations drove them to install Couchsurfing, made acquaintances, and formed more intimate relationships with new friends they know through the app.

Informants learned about Couchsurfing from their friends, social media, and articles from Google. From these sources, they know Couchsurfing as the provider of free housing when traveling from one city to another. Informants described Couchsurfing as 'alternative lodging', 'free accommodation', and 'a place to stop for a while before continuing to another city'. Thus, the main motivation for the informants to use Couchsurfing is to find a free place to stay when traveling. Other informants also use Couchsurfing as alternative lodging when attending international conferences abroad.

The next motivation is related to the bonds of multiculturalism friendship. Before the internet came along, cross-culturalism is generally found in people that meet in person, such as students of international schools or participants in international conferences. With the presence of the internet, ordinary people do not have to pay a lot to get network of international cross-cultural friendships (Naseri, 2018). The presence of Couchsurfing is also a bridge that connects users in one country to another, so that hosts and surfers may exchange their cultures with each other.

The hosts are willing to accept the surfers at their house because they are interested in learning about the culture of the country where the surfers come from. In addition, the hosts are also motivated to increase the network of friends with people from various countries. The hosts' hopes when they come to the city where the surfers come from, they will be greeted friendly in the same way as they welcome the surfers to their house. Other motivations are related to mastery of foreign languages, exchange of information about traveling the world, and seeking new experiences related to the global experience. In previous studies, young people are motivated to use Couchsurfing to carry out their desires of making long trips from one city to another for months. Surfers say that it will be part of their efforts to self-development and build new connections abroad (Yoon, 2014).

Some informants immediately decided to use Couchsurfing after installing the application

on their smartphones. On the other hand, some informants firstly observed the application. An informant from Bandung created a Couchsurfing account in 2013 but used it for the first time in 2015. This shows that the informant has uncertainty about the app firstly. Meanwhile, an informant from Semarang installed Couchsurfing when he came to Palembang City and immediately asked for *request to stay* on the same day. Every informant held expectations when installing and using the application (Riele, 2010), such as the hope of getting free lodging, friendly hosts, and desires to fulfill their motivation related to learning foreign languages and exchanging traveling experiences with one another. These hopes made them take the initiative to become surfers and hosts of Couchsurfing.

When using Couchsurfing for the first time, before meeting the hosts or surfers they interacted with through the app, informants felt anxious and afraid. The informants admitted that they thought about hosts and surfers that they would meet. They estimated the hosts or surfers that they will meet on the first time. The finding in this research shows that informants have stereotypes about the surfers and hosts. They thought widely about specific types of individuals or certain ways of hosts and surfers behaving.

Individual stereotypes about new people may affect their attitudes towards them. Stereotypes create admiration for certain subjects, for example, white people (Dale et al., 2020). Meanwhile, people may have negative feelings such as fear and anxiety, and acts of rejection towards people of color. These stereotypes may cause anxiety when the user uses Couchsurfing and gets to know hosts or surfers from different countries. An informant from Jakarta shared her story when she used Couchsurfing for the first time. She used Couchsurfing when she visited Middle Eastern countries three years ago. At that time, she felt anxious about the hosts in the Middle East who would give her a place to stay. The anxiety stemmed from mass media that published news related to countries in the Middle East that are involved in the conflict. Moreover, her friends said that the Middle East regularly witnesses bombings and shootings. It made her feel very anxious about people from the Middle East. This shows that surfers could feel anxiety and fear even before the encounter with hosts has occurred.

The informant from Semarang also experienced a similar thing. She recounted the experience as hosts of Couchsurfing for the first time. She was worried when she received a request to stay notification from surfers in February 2020. These surfers came from China. She felt afraid because China was the center of the COVID-19 outbreak at that time.

Other informants firmly said that they felt enthusiastic when they used Couchsurfing for the first time. They kept the hope that Couchsurfing will connect them to the person who provides the lodge as the place to stay. They not only got to the lodge but also met new friends when they visited those places. The other advantage is that hosts of Couchsurfing may become local guides in the city that is visited by the informant. They believe that local people may provide new and interesting information about the culture and tourist attractions in this place.

This fact was also told by an informant from Bandung. He narrated when he visited Bangkok for the first time in 2015. He decided to *request to stay* with a Thai citizen. His hosts came from a local tribe in Thailand. He expected that hosts from Thailand might become local guides as well as provide new knowledge and information related to Thai culture. His expectation was realized in the field. He learned to cook traditional Thai food from his hosts. Thai hosts also showed the train lines in Bangkok when the informant wanted to sightsee the city. If the informant did not want to use public transportation, Thai hosts were willing to find a bicycle to be lent to the informant. This first experience made the informant as surfers more excited to use Couchsurfing when traveling abroad.

The informant from Semarang also told about his experience as host for surfers from Turkey. The informant hoped that he could converse in the foreign language and increase his knowledge about it by accepting the surfers from Turkey. He needs interlocutors from abroad to increase his experience and knowledge by speaking directly with foreigners. This enthusiasm completely overcame his anxiety. He admitted that he had felt afraid and anxious about the arrival of the Turkish into his boarding house. However, the enthusiasm to meet strangers and speak English was more than enough to overcome his fear.

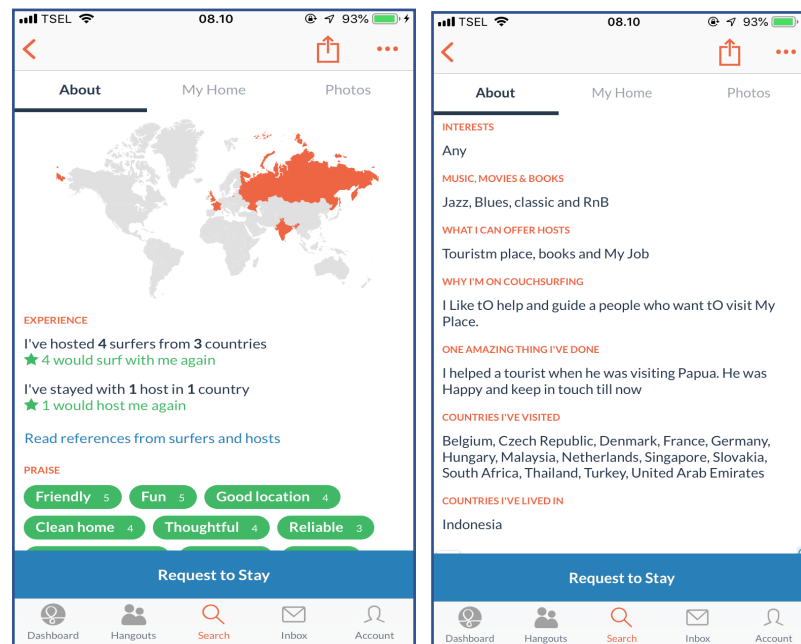


Figure 1. The form of profile description on Couchsurfing app
Source: Informant' profile description.

The informant from Pangkal Pinang explained that she could know the characteristics of hosts and surfers from their profile descriptions. Because of profile description, she may find out about their occupation, hobbies, languages mastery, and countries that they have visited previously. By the information from their profile description, she got the idea to open the conversation with hosts and surfers as strangers. This girl and hosts or surfers may talk about hobbies, work, and travel experiences that they have done before.

Another factor that makes informants trust hosts and surfers is the profile picture on Couchsurfing app. Based on observation data on 14 accounts, the photo used by informants is a real picture. The picture describes their hobbies, the places that they have traveled, and their jobs. For example, an informant from Bandung posted a profile picture in which he was taking a photo with a camera. It means that the informant's hobby is photography. The other informants displayed their photos in places that become the icons of their city. For example, an informant from Semarang displayed her photos on a place which reads the Old City of Semarang. On the other hand, an informant from Jakarta used her photo that she took when she visited the Champ de Mars in Paris. Meanwhile, an informant from Ungaran displayed her picture in which she wore a white

uniform with a stethoscope. This shows that she is employed as a medical worker. All the descriptions above imply that the displayed profile picture is reflection of the identity of users.

Informants said that they do not believe in the surfers or hosts who used unreal photos on Couchsurfing app. An informant from Balikpapan told about his experience when receiving requests from surfers who used a profile picture with anime pictures. He rejected the surfers because he considered that it was just a fake account.

After confirming the authenticity of the profile picture belonging to the hosts or surfers, the next thing that is considered by the individual to accept surfers or visit hosts is the reference comment in the Couchsurfing account. If the surfers or hosts have stayed or have received people staying at his house, he will get a reference comment. Surfers will get reference comments from the hosts, and vice versa. All informants confirmed that good and supportive reference comments would be a very strong consideration to accept the surfers. Reference comments are also found on Airbnb (Mao et al., 2019) and e-commerce apps. People who bought goods in e-commerce may leave comments in the e-commerce column, ranging from criticism or positive comments (Ananda, 2017). Informants said that the reference

comments on the Couchsurfing account may describe the personality of hosts or surfers.

On the other hand, another informant said that people who do not have references yet may also be trusted to stay at their house. For hosts and surfers who do not have references, creating a good impression through interaction using the chat feature of the app is an important step. They also have to create a convincing profile description. The profile picture used must also be original and show the performance of the account owner (Chen, 2017). Apart from the descriptions of the Couchsurfing account which 'cannot speak' for it is only a description in the form of writing, interaction through chat between the hosts and surfers is a good step to build closeness.

Informants like hosts who reply to their chats when they ask for a request to stay. The same is also true for surfers who chat with them. The informants want surfers who not only press requests to stay but also greet them and say their purpose of visiting the city. Therefore, chatting becomes an important part of the encounter and builds a close relationship between the hosts and the surfers.

An informant from Palembang narrated his experience with surfers from Australia who asked request to stay at his house. The surfers just created a Couchsurfing account and had no reference comments at all. The surfers talked with the informant through the chat feature in the Couchsurfing application. The informant from Palembang said that the words used by the surfers when chatting were polite. The surfers introduced himself and intended to visit Palembang. He said that it was the first time for him to use Couchsurfing. The informant from Palembang then received the request to stay from the surfers because of the surfers' good manners when sending a chat to the informant.

A chat will also be a determinant for individuals to continue the relationship with the surfers or hosts. If individuals feel uncomfortable with the words on chat, they will choose to end the relationship with the surfers or hosts. Several female informants complained about chats that made them feel uncomfortable, especially chats from male hosts and surfers who gave signals to have sex.

An informant from Jambi told about her experience when receiving a request to stay as well as a chat from male surfers. She considered the surfer to be impolite because he alluded to an invitation to have sex. She did not reply to the chat and immediately blocked the account. She decided that she would only open her house

to surfers if her husband is at home. If her husband is going to work out of town, she is not willing to accept requests to stay from anyone, especially men.

Chatting is part of online communication and is one of the means to reduce the uncertainty between strangers (Kampen Robinson & Liebscher, 2019), including uncertainty between hosts and surfers. Through chatting, hosts and surfers who are already familiar with each other may exchange social media accounts. Surfers may follow hosts' Instagram and vice versa. The exchange of social media will run smoothly if the informants build good conversation via chat between them and the hosts or surfers. They exchange social media to form closer and intimate relationships (Habito et al., 2021).

In addition, if an individual still does not trust the potential hosts and surfers, then the individual may collect information about the hosts and surfers through their social media. The more people use social media, the easier it is for someone to find contacts and social networks, as well as personal data about that person (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2014). Therefore, the informants make social as an alternative to find out more about the identity and characteristics of the hosts and surfers.

The informant from Bandung explained that he pays attention to the social media belonging to hosts and surfers whom he will meet in person. As a father of a daughter, he is most careful with male surfers who will visit his house. He has been refusing surfers because the surfers followed famous porn-star social media. It made the informant discouraged from accepting the surfers. This shows that social media is one of the causes of trust growth between hosts and surfers who get acquainted through the Couchsurfing app.

After gathering information about hosts and surfers through profile descriptions, profile pictures, and reference comments, individuals build trust in their interlocutors through chats and social media exchanges. These efforts are a way of reducing uncertainty between individuals and hosts and surfers whom they will meet in person.

The similarities between individuals and hosts or surfers will trigger a close relationship between them. The similarities could start from their hobbies. Next are gender, place of birth, and religion. An informant from Bandung whose hobby is surfing will be more comfortable to choose hosts who have the same hobby. This was done by the informant when

visiting Bali. At that time, he asked for a request to stay with hosts who shared the same, so they could exchange information about surfing techniques and surfing spots in Bali.

Furthermore, a person of the same gender may create a sense of security. As said by an informant from Jambi, she feels safer and more comfortable with surfers or hosts of the same gender as her. She may share stories, share rooms, and share beds with female surfers and hosts. When she travels abroad, the informant from Jambi always chooses to request to stay with female hosts.

Another case is the same religion, as narrated by several informants in this study. They said that it is more comfortable to live with people of the same religion. One of the informants from Palembang was very happy when he got hosts in Amsterdam. The hosts came from Palestine and he was studying in the Netherlands. The Palembang informant confirmed that he had no problem with the hosts who come from a different religion. However, the informant prefers someone of the same religion, because it is easier for the informant to perform prayer in the hosts' house. He shared that the previous hosts had a dog in the house, so he felt uncomfortable when praying in the hosts' house.

The similarity of resident is also one of the things that make informants willing to stay and share with hosts and surfers. This was exemplified by an informant from Semarang who was walking around watching the ASEAN Games in Palembang. He asked for a request to stay with several hosts in Palembang. Of all the hosts who agreed to his request, he preferred to stay at a house far from the ASEAN Games venue. He did not mind because the host was a resident from Semarang who worked in Palembang. He felt the closeness between himself and the hosts from Palembang because they are the same residents from Semarang.

Close relationships may be established without having to meet face to face. Several informants admitted that they had established close relationships with hosts and surfers before they met each other. For example, an informant from Semarang said that she failed to meet surfers from China because of COVID-19. The Chinese surfers canceled her trip to Indonesia. Even though they did not meet, they still keep in contact. They chatted, communicated by phone, and talked by video calls. The things that they discussed were about the daily grind. They also shared information about traveling and listened to each other's stories. They had

developed a close relationship as if they had met in person. Things like making friends without having to meet face to face are common amid technological developments like today. Individuals may form a close friendship through digital media even though there is a 'space' between them (Wang & Edwards, 2016).

When hosts and surfers meet face to face, they talk about themselves. They do self-disclosure. When communicating through the chat feature, they only discuss what the surfers will do in the city where the hosts live. The information shared is also very limited. When individuals have met the hosts or surfers, their relationship becomes more intimate with each other. When meeting face to face, it is easier to exchange messages by paying attention to non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions and body language. The informants may describe that the surfers or hosts are fun from their non-verbal movements, such as laughing when they exchange jokes, facial expressions that show their interest with culinary of the city where they live, and happy expressions when eating the local food provided by the individual to the surfers. In social psychology, people smile because they are generally happy. Smiles are mostly synonymous with happiness and contagiousness (Gunnery & Hall, 2015). The non-verbal language in the form of smiles of the surfers when enjoying regional specialties turned out to be the beginning for surfers and hosts to start their good relationship.

Informants not only create intimacy with surfers and hosts when meeting face to face but also the possibility to create conflict that leads to the end of a relationship. Some of the informants experienced it with both the hosts and the surfers. One of them is an informant from Bontang. As hosts of Couchsurfing, he mentioned that he did not continue the friendship with the surfers who stayed at his boarding house because the surfers came to the informant's residence in the afternoon and left it unlocked without saying goodbye. This made the informant from Bontang angry and did not want to continue the close relationship with the surfers.

Meanwhile, the informant from Palembang also told about the hosts in the Netherlands. When he stayed at the hosts' apartment, the hosts were smoking marijuana and offered it to the informant. When the informant refused, the hosts' attitude turned cold towards him. The hosts did not utter harsh words, but his attitude was indifferent, and did not care about the

informant as surfers who was staying at his apartment. Since then, the informant from Palembang decided not to continue his friendship with that hosts.

One of the informant's efforts to familiarize themselves with hosts and surfers they met through Couchsurfing is to do activities together. An informant from Balikpapan told her experience when invited by hosts from Austria to travel around the country with hosts' college friends using a car in groups. Although traveling around Austria was not on the schedule, the informant agreed to the invitation and it made her relationship with hosts even closer.

The close relationship between the hosts and the surfers was closed by the communication with social media. It is an effort to maintain good relations between hosts and surfers. The informant from Palembang said that he and the Australian surfers only met for three days in 2015 and did not meet again until 2020. However, for five years, the informant and the Australian surfers have been in contact via Facebook. They ask each other how they are doing and keep sharing stories. The Australian was married and told that happy news to the informant from Palembang.

Another informant from Serang also told a similar story. When he traveled to Manila and was accepted by the hosts there, they became close and exchanged social media since 2017. They kept in contact and asked each other how they are doing. In 2020, when the hosts from Manila got married, she sent an invitation and plane ticket via email to the informant. The hosts from Manila wanted the informant from Serang to be present at her wedding. This shows the close relationship between the hosts and surfers of Couchsurfing. The friendship is still

close even though they have been separated with long distance. The friendship between hosts and surfers is maintained when they follow each other on social media, comment on each other's photos, and share information or news through social media (Edwards & Wang, 2018).

Based on the results of the description above, there are five phases of the hosts and surfers to reduce uncertainty and form a close relationship with one another. First, the phase of know and believe with technology. In this phase, individuals grow their trust in the Couchsurfing application first before growing their trust in its users. People find out more about the app first. Therefore, some individuals use Couchsurfing for quite a long time because they develop confidence in the application first. Individuals decide to install Couchsurfing when they feel confident that Couchsurfing is the right application to realize their motivation.

Next is the pre-conversation phase. In this phase, the individual seeks information in advance about the interlocutor. They will read profile descriptions, pay attention to profile pictures, and read reference comments of hosts or surfers with whom they will have interaction. Next, the individual enters the online conversation phase-1. In this phase, the surfers and the hosts will contact each other. The contact is made through the chat feature in the Couchsurfing application. If the other person uses polite words in introducing themselves, the individual will welcome the request from the surfers. The individuals as the hosts may accept the surfers to stay at their house, or the individuals as the surfers decide to stay at the hosts' house. This indicates that online communication could reduce uncertainty between individuals and their interlocutors.

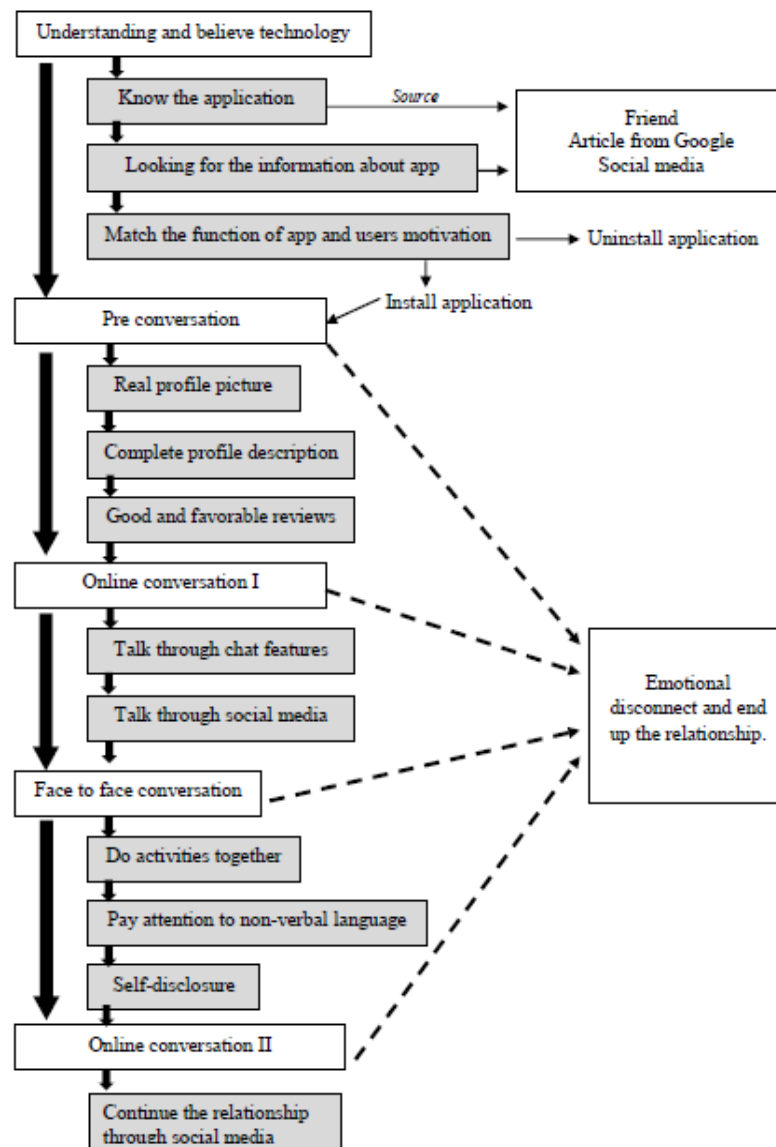


Figure 2. Scheme of uncertainty reduction and build the close relationship between hosts and surfers.

Source: Author' design

Chatting may be said to be the "first door" to get to the stage of intimacy between the hosts and the surfers. After the individual and the interlocutor had their first conversation via chat, they began to exchange more private data, such as social media. Such exchange of privacy demonstrates the growing trust and good relationship between the hosts and the surfers.

After contacts through chat and social media, they proceed to meet in person. The surfers come to the hosts' house and stay there. It may be concluded that the hosts and surfers start a close relationship via chatting and social media first to avoid awkwardness when it is time to meet in person.

The next phase is the face-to-face conversation phase. At this stage, the individual and the potential hosts or surfers have removed the uncertainty between them. Hosts are willing to share a place to live with surfers known through Couchsurfing. When they meet face to face, they begin to do self-disclosure about themselves. They tell about their experiences, family, even love stories. The close relationship that has been formed since the first online conversation phase makes it easier for individuals to become familiar with the interlocutor in subsequent phases.

The last phase is the online conversation second phase. At this stage, the individual who parted ways with the hosts and surfers

continued their close relationship through digital media. They communicate with each other through social media.

Before the individual moves from one stage to another, there is a possibility that the individual experiences emotional disconnect in each phase. Not all individuals go through the pre-conversation phase to the online conversation first phase. Individuals who feel like they do not fit in with the surfers or hosts based on their profile description, will certainly not continue their relationship. They prefer to end their relationship. Bad impressions in every phase of the relationship will make the emotional disconnect on that relationship, so they also end it. Disconnect of the relationship may also occur in later stages. If the individual feels incompatible with the hosts and surfers at any stage, then disconnect of the relationship may occur between them.

Conclusions

The presence of technology diversifies individuals' ways of reducing uncertainty and developing close relationships. Before individuals believe in humans, individuals go through the phase of understanding and know the technology first. Individuals convince themselves that the application is the right thing to meet their needs and motivations. Individuals convince themselves by looking for information about the application from various sources, including friends, social media, and articles on the internet. After making sure that the application can be trusted, individuals enter the pre-conversation stage, the online conversation first phase, face-to-face conversation, and online conversation second phase. Not all hosts and surfers on Couchsurfing go through all of these stages because they can disconnect the relationship if there is a conflict in one of these phases. These stages tell about how uncertainty can be removed and close relationships can be formed without the need to meet each other.

The presence of technology has the potential to develop theories of interpersonal and intercultural communication in the future. The results of this study have shown a significant difference in the reduction of uncertainty and the formation of intimate relationships online and face-to-face. When the reduction of uncertainty and the formation of close relationships are carried out online, technology plays an important role in it. To form trust, individuals start by believing in technology first, specifically believing in profile descriptions, reference comments, and

profile pictures. Likewise with the disconnection of relationship stage. Disconnection of relationships is very likely to occur in technology-mediated interactions. The cause also happens to something written in technology. This shows that humans believe not only in humans but also in technology made by humans. Before starting a close relationship and end up the relationship, humans are also affected by what is written and published by humans too with technology's assist.

References

- Aken, N. van. (2016). *The Transformation of Online Friendships into a Real Life Context in Individuals with Social Anxiety-Development and Application of the Need to Transfer Scale* [Universitat Wien]. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.15384.65284>
- Ananda, L. D. (2017). Dinamika Trust pada Pemasaran Online di Media Sosial. *Jurnal Komunikasi Indonesia*, 5(1), 14–25.
- Anderson, E. L., Steen, E., & Stavropoulos, V. (2017). Internet use and Problematic Internet Use: A systematic review of longitudinal research trends in adolescence and emergent adulthood. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 22(4), 430–454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2016.1227716>
- BBC News. (2015, February 6). Italy policeman charged with “couchsurfing” rape. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31165350>
- Chen, D.-J. (2017). Couchsurfing: Performing the travel style through hospitality exchange. *Journal of Tourist Studies*, 18(1), 105–122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797617710597>
- Christakis, N. A., & Fowler, J. H. (2014). *Friendship and natural selection. Proceeding of National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 111(3), 796–801. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1400825111>
- Dale, K. R., Janicke-Bowles, S. H., Raney, A. A., Oliver, M. B., Huse, L.-K., Lopez, J., Reed, A., Seibert, J., & Zhao, D. (2020). Awe and Stereotypes: Examining Awe as an Intervention against Stereotypical

- Media Portrayals of African Americans. *Communication Studies*, 71(4), 699–707. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2020.1754264>
- Dickson, F. (1986). Self-Disclosure with Friends Across the Life Cycles. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 3, 259–264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407586032009>
- Edwards, S., & Wang, V. (2018). There are two sides to every story: Young people's perspectives of relationship issues on social media and adult responses. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21(6), 717–732. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1418083>
- Firmansyah, M., Amelia, R., Jamil, R., Faturochman, F., & Minza, W. (2019). Benevolence, Competency, and Integrity: Which is More Influential on Trust in Friendship? *Jurnal Psikologi*, 18, 91–105. <https://doi.org/10.14710/jp.18.1.91-105>
- Flowers, S. J. A., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. SAGE Publications Inc.
- Gómez-Urrutia, V., & Tello-Navarro, F. (2021). Gender, love and the Internet: Romantic online interactions in Chilean young people. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 24(6), 731–745. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1764512>
- Griffin, E., Ledbetter, A., & Sparks, G. (2019). *A First Look at Communication Theory* (10th ed.). McGraw Hill Education.
- Guhr, N., Werth, O., Blacha, P. P. H., & Breitner, M. H. (2020). Privacy concerns in the smart home context. *SN Applied Sciences*, 2(2), 247. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42452-020-2025-8>
- Gunnery, S. D., & Hall, J. A. (2015). The Expression and Perception of the Duchenne Smile. In *The Social Psychology of Nonverbal Communication* (pp. 114–133). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Habito, C. M., Morgan, A., & Vaughan, C. (2021). Direct and instant: The role of digital technology and social media in young Filipinos' intimate relationships. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2021.1877825>
- Juniarti, G. (2021). Pertukaran Sosial Antara Dua Individu dengan Aplikasi Couchsurfing sebagai Perantara. *Jurnal Sosiologi Nusantara*, 7(1), 51–76. <https://doi.org/10.33369/jsn.7.1.51-76>
- Kahija, L. O. Y. F. (2017). *Penelitian Fenomenologis. Jalan Memahami Pengalaman Hidup*. Kanisius Yogyakarta.
- Kampen Robinson, C., & Liebscher, G. (2019). Relationship building in L2 telecollaboration: Examining language learner closings in online text-based chats. *Classroom Discourse*, 10(1), 29–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2019.1567359>
- Kaplan, S., & Bashyal, P. (2015, September 8). *Missing American volunteer, Dahlia Yehia, beaten to death in Nepal*. Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/09/08/american-volunteer-25-was-beaten-to-death-in-nepal-police-say/>
- Kelly, P. (2000). Youth as an Artefact of Expertise: Problematizing the Practice of Youth Studies in an Age of Uncertainty. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 3(3), 301–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713684381>
- Kirchgaessner, S. (2015, February 6). Italian policeman 'used Couchsurfing website to drug and assault travellers.' *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/06/italian-allegedly-used-couchsurfing-website-to-assault-women>
- Mao, Z., Jones, M., Li, M., & Wei, W. (2019). Sleeping in a stranger's home: A trust formation model for Airbnb. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 42(1), 67–76. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2019.11.012>
- Martey, R. M., & Consalvo, M. (2011). Performing the Looking-Glass Self: Avatar Appearance and Group Identity in Second Life. *Popular Communication*, 9(3), 165–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2011.583830>
- Morissan. (2018). *Teori Komunikasi Individu hingga Massa*, Jakarta: Prenadamedia Group.

- Naseri, S. (2018). Cross-Cultural Perceptions and Challenges of Students' Friendship Formation. *International Academic Conference on Humanities and Social Science*.
<https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.16604.28801>
- Riele, K. te. (2010). Philosophy of hope: Concepts and applications for working with marginalized youth. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 13(1), 35–46.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260903173496>
- Rizal, M. N., & Langerya, G. (2021). Hubungan antara Intimate Friendship dengan Self-Disclosure pada Mahasiswa Pengguna WhatsApp. *Jurnal Psikologi Proyeksi*, 16(1), 15–24. <https://doi.org/DOI:http://dx.doi.org/10.30659/jp.16.1>
- Rosen, D., Lafontaine, P. R., & Hendrickson, B. (2011). CouchSurfing: Belonging and trust in a globally cooperative online social network. *New Media & Society*, 13(6), 981–998.
- Schor, J. B., & Vallas, S. P. (2020). The Sharing Economy: Rhetoric and Reality. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 47.
- Sherly, S., Hartini, S., & Manurung, Y. (2019). Intimasi Pertemanan ditinjau dari Self-Disclosure pada Mahasiswa Jurusan Kebidanan Universitas Prima Indonesia. *Journal of Education, Humaniora, and Social Science*, 2(1), 36–46.
<https://doi.org/DOI:https://doi.org/10.34007/jehss.v2i1.49>
- Wang, V., & Edwards, S. (2016). Strangers are friends I haven't met yet: A positive approach to young people's use of social media. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19(9), 1204–1219.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1154933>
- Yoon, K. (2014). Transnational youth mobility in the neoliberal economy of experience. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(8), 1014–1028.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.878791>