Emergence, viability and competitive leverages of CouchSurfing in the national capital region of the Philippines: basis for a propose strategic brand awareness program

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Abstract. CouchSurfing is a travel-related mobile application that focuses on helping its users find free-of-charge accommodation and also engage in cultural exchange. This study aimed to determine its emergence, viability and competitive leverages in the National Capital Region of the Philippines. A mixed-method approach was utilized wherein survey questionnaires which were distributed online to 37 respondent CouchSurfers and structured interview guide questions were constructed to be answered by the founder of CouchSurfing and selected active CouchSurfers. The result found there was definitive list of factors that affected the emergence and competitive leverages of CouchSurfing as mobile application. In additions, there was an established definitive assessment of CouchSurfing in the tourism and hospitality service based on the respondent-CouchSurfers’ satisfaction level. Therefore, a strategic brand awareness program is being proposed through utilization of gathered data.

1. Introduction
The hospitality is defined as friendly and generous guest and visitors reception and entertainment [1]. The tourism and hospitality sector contributes significant share of gross domestic product in many countries and increased profit organizations and taxes in various budget levels [2]. The environment and customer mobility changes lead to hospitality and hospitality industry concepts are changing rapidly [3].

The network hospitality is introduced which refers to way of hospitality users exchange services for connect each other with online social networking systems included the relationship created when meet each other offline and face to face [4]. In tourism and hospitality sector, social networking sites is opportunity for the industries to connect with their customers and employees in a fast and efficient way [5]. Social networking sites and other Web 2.0 applications have combined new information assessment way and relational contacts with communities of practice to create socio-technical networks [6].

CouchSurfing is an online community where million members from around the world locate accommodations while traveling by staying in the other member members [6]. Couchsurfing is non-profit organization that seeks to internationally network people and places which creates educational exchanges, raise collective consciousness, spread tolerance and facilitate cultural understanding [7].
1997, Casey Fenton came up with an idea of programming the CouchSurfing application and launched in 2003. CouchSurfing consists of strangers group from all corners of the world who can see each other’s profiles and make requests to stay at someone else’s house [8]. This opportunity to connect individuals who share common interests and ideals such as openness to strangers [6]. This study aimed to determine its emergence, viability and competitive leverages in the National Capital Region of the Philippines.

2. Methodology

This study used three methods of research design included descriptive approach, qualitative approach and Quantitative Approach. The qualitative approach is research method type that did not included measurement and statistics. The quantitative approach deals with numerical data through variables.

The samples were determined with purposive sampling which known as judgmental or expert sampling. The study was focused on intended population and survey. The study population were CouchSurfing community based in the National capital region of the Philippines because this location was tourism gateway in the country and most active CouchSurfers were resided in this location.

The respondents were obtained used online survey due to most convenient way to disseminate the survey since CouchSurfers were geographically dispersed. The potential samples list were obtained through random messaging used the CouchSurfing mobile application and through posting in CouchSurfing Manila Facebook group. The sample size computation is based on the confidence interval derivation of respondent means.

The preliminary data which consists of 30 respondents which standard deviation for data consistency with additional respondent numbers needed to complete final sample size. The required respondent number would satisfy necessary samples for three measurement in the questionnaires such as efficiency, convenience and safety and security were 35 respondents. For each variable, the sample size was computed used aggregate ratings. The survey responses number to be gathered was equal to highest value of sample size computed from individual measures.

This study was combination of qualitative and quantitative approach. The survey questionnaires and structured interview guide questions were prepared for face-to-face interview. The multiple choice questions were used. In first part, demographic profile which included name, age, gender, marital status, nationality and mobile application usage purpose. Meanwhile, second part was rating scale which popularly known as Likert Scale. The Likert Scale was often used as research instrument in various studies since this scale was designed to acquired respondent agreement level to statement set. The study was used 4-point Likert scale to measure satisfaction level of CouchSurfing website and mobile application users. This survey was divided into different categories included efficiency, convenience and safety and security.

In additions, the study also conducted a pilot testing with pre-test group that similar characteristics of respondent-CouchSurfers. This pilot testing was conducted to assess the reliability and consistency of questionnaire in measured the variable. The consistency was measured used Cronbach’s Alpha formula.

A structured interview guide questionnaire was constructed and divided into several parts. In first part, the questions regarded emergence of CouchSurfing based on motivational factors of the users, efficiency and website and mobile application convenience, socio-cultural factors and economic factors. Meanwhile, second part consisted competitive leverages of CouchSurfing among other travel-related mobile applications and encompasses the marketing strategies and safety and security measurement.

The study instrument utilized were all consulted to the different expert validators for prepared survey questionnaires and structured interview guide questions to guarantee that study goals was confidently achieved. Meanwhile, the extensive research with reviewed numerous journal articles, online resources and other review of related literatures regarded their topic for secondary data collection. The study was able to conduct first-hand experiences through series of fieldwork.
The survey questionnaires and interview guide for the respondents. The survey questionnaires consisted of two parts included demographic profile, viability of CouchSurfing assessment in tourism and hospitality service in national capital region of the Philippines in term of its efficiency, convenience and safety and security measurement. Since the respondents-CouchSurfers were local tourists in the country and others were inbound tourist (geographically-scattered) lead an online survey was held through typeform. The online distribution toward 20 respondents was done in two days.

The actual online survey was distributed to 37 respondents-CouchSurfers was conducted from March 8 to March 15, 2018. Furthermore, the additional information through a structured interview toward 10 respondent-CouchSurfers. In additions, face-to-face interview was conducted with CouchSurfing founder on March 3, 2018. The statistical treatments used were summation, averaging, Cronbach’s Alpha, 2-Sample T-test of means and 2-Sample Test for proportions.

3. Result and Discussion

The respondents were in age group ranges between 18 years old and 27 years old, dominant gender were females, and single. Meanwhile, the primary purpose of CouchSurfing usage for cultural exchange and events or gatherings. The CouchSurfers was considered as drifter since lived with local community and completely engage with local culture through home, food and practices sharing.

Existing CouchSurfers were motivated for their love of travel and learning on other culture included their willingness to be part of various event or gathering. The influence from family and friend also encouraged the respondents to use CouchSurfing mobile application to obtain unique and deeper travel experiences. Furthermore, the respondents had desired to meet and connect with people who shared same personality and interest.

The mobile application was efficient and convenient in sense that straightforward and user-friendly. The features were well-organized and easy to manipulate. The signing-up process was reasonably time consumption for requirement needed were important personal information that the users were willing to impart which could decreased uncertainty level of fellow CouchSurfers. Moreover, the account verification was key consideration in term finding hosts and accepted guests.

The belongingness sense to the CouchSurfing community lead to experiences more interactive and more personal. Mutual respect was established between its members through understand cultural diversity that diminished racism and discrimination. The emergence of CouchSurfing was benefit toward economy of the Philippines through increased tourist arrivals. CouchSurfers contributed to the local government fund by increased tourism expenditures through spending on basic necessities, transportation and activities.

Table 1. Satisfaction level on efficiency.

| Instructions                  | Satisfaction level |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| Free of charge accommodation  | Very satisfactory   |
| Reduced travel cost           | Very satisfactory   |
| Sufficient local host         | Satisfactory       |
| Transaction with well-minded  | Satisfactory       |
| Time consumption while used mobile application | Satisfactory |

Based on Table 2, the respondents were very satisfied with availability of CouchSurfing in mobile phone operation system, CouchSurfing in computer and familiarization and navigation of mobile application. Meanwhile, the respondents were satisfied with completion of the signing-up process,
verification process speed, convenience in complied with requirement and incorporated features in mobile application.

**Table 2.** Respondents satisfaction level on convenience for CouchSurfers.

| Instructions                                                                 | Satisfaction level |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Availability of CouchSurfing in mobile phone operation system such as iOS and Android | Very satisfactory   |
| Availability of CouchSurfing in computers                                     | Very satisfactory   |
| The familiarization and navigation of mobile application                     | Very satisfactory   |
| Completion of the signing-up process                                          | Satisfactory        |
| Speed of the verification process                                              | Satisfactory        |
| Convenience in complied with the requirement                                  | Satisfactory        |
| Incorporated features in mobile application                                   | Satisfactory        |

In table 3, the respondents were satisfied with safety and security measurement on CouchSurfing. The respondents were satisfied with overall profile verification process, environment of host location, presence of public and private institution in the vicinity of host location and privacy of user confidential information.

**Table 3.** Satisfaction level in terms of safety and security measurement.

| Instructions                                                                 | Satisfaction level |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Overall profile verification process                                          | Satisfactory        |
| Environment of the hosts location                                            | Satisfactory        |
| Presence of public and private institutions in the vicinity of the host location | Satisfactory        |
| Privacy of user confidential information                                     | Satisfactory        |

The strongest marketing strategy of CouchSurfing through mouth and social media platforms and Facebook was identified as leading promotional medium online. Other two marketing strategies such as printed publications and television appearances were deemed unnecessary since nowadays information spread faster with aid of social networking sites.

CouchSurfing had unique way of profile verification process among other travel-related mobile application for required possible personal information that were accepted to various countries. The verified accounts increased credibility and reliability of CouchSurfers. The mobile application had different approach with reviews and testimonials since two parties had provided comments for review to appear their profiles whether positive or negative.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, CouchSurfing has been and continued to emerge and viable as a travel mobile application in the tourism and hospitality industry as continued to be competitive among other travel mobile application. The proposed brand awareness program was planned and created based on the combined qualitative and quantitative results of the research. This program comprised of target market, medium, goals, indicators and specific plans of actions. There were two target markets which were the Filipino ‘Generation Y’ commonly known as the Filipino ‘Millennial’ and Inbound Tourists.
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