Account Sharing in the Context of Networked Hospitality Exchange

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines account sharing in the context of networked hospitality exchange. I discuss the dynamics of account sharing based on a qualitative interview study with multi-person households who offer to host visitors via Couchsurfing.org. Findings reveal that multi-person households that engage in account sharing face several challenges, including presenting multiple people in one profile, coordinating negotiations over access to domestic space, and representing in a fair way the reputation hosts have accumulated together over time. Amidst the rising rhetoric of a ‘reputation economy’, this paper calls for engaging the inclusions, exclusions, and inequalities that reputation metrics may renew or create, especially if they fail to acknowledge people’s account sharing practices. Furthermore, this paper encourages adopting a design focus beyond individuals in order to support maintaining shared accounts and interacting with others through them. The findings have implications for a variety of hospitality exchange services and other online systems.

Author Keywords
Sharing; account sharing, online profile; social network service; Couchsurfing; reputation

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms
Human Factors; Design

INTRODUCTION
Studies on password sharing in diverse contexts \cite{5,7,10,11} have pointed out challenges resulting from a disregard of people’s practices and called for holistic approaches to designing systems and security policies. For instance, focusing merely on password strength and change frequency may not be useful if organizational security ignores people’s everyday practices of password sharing \cite{7}. Characterizing password sharing as a nuanced practice in which people engage with thought and care, Kaye \cite{5} counters the more traditional conceptualization that frames it as a deviant practice that should be stamped out.

This paper examines the broader issue of account sharing in the context networked hospitality exchange. ‘Network hospitality’ \cite{4} refers to how those engaging with hospitality exchange services, such as Couchsurfing.org\textsuperscript{1}, connect to one another using online social networking systems, as well as to the kinds of relationships they perform when they meet face-to-face. On Couchsurfing.org, members can engage in hospitality exchange by hosting visitors (‘couchsurfers’) or by staying with others as guests.

In order to unravel practices of account sharing in the context of networked hospitality exchange, I present a qualitative study on multi-person households who offer to host strangers in their homes through Couchsurfing.org. Findings illustrate that beyond sharing credentials, account sharing involves complex negotiations over how to present multiple people in a single profile, how to coordinate the households’ out-facing communication and decisions over whether to grant potential visitors access to the home, as well as how to share fairly the benefits of a good reputation.

While the analysis in this paper focuses on a single system that fosters non-monetary network hospitality, the issues it raises have implications for a variety of online systems. First, there is a growing number of similar hospitality exchange services, such as Bewelcome\textsuperscript{2} and Hospitality Club\textsuperscript{3}. Furthermore, when it comes to account sharing, sites that make a business out of helping people monetize their willingness to make domestic spaces or other tangible resources available to others are likely to encounter similar issues. The paper concludes with a discussion of designing for shared use and an invitation to consider how a design

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\textsuperscript{1} http://www.couchsurfing.org/  
\textsuperscript{2} http://www.bewelcome.org/  
\textsuperscript{3} http://www.hospitalityclub.org/
focus beyond individuals could help support users’ efforts to maintain shared accounts as well as to interact and exchange with others through them.

**HOSPITALITY EXCHANGE VIA COUCHSURFING.ORG**

The empirical site of this study, Couchsurfing.org, is a social network site (SNS) focused on hospitality exchange. Members can offer to host couchsurfers at their home or request to stay as guests. While it is possible to solely host or surf, over time members tend to engage in both ways [6]. As a rule, couchsurfing involves no monetary exchange as stays take place with the broad goal of promoting intercultural experiences and understanding between people of different backgrounds [6].

Prior research on Couchsurfing.org has examined practices of writing references, the small testimonials that guests and hosts post to one another after visits [13] and disclosing information in online profiles [8]. Accumulating references to the profile is an important way for profile owners to establish a trustworthy reputation within the network. Notions of reciprocity and trust [6,9] have attracted scholarly attention, as trust has been deemed crucial for letting a stranger sleep in one’s home or for staying on someone else’s couch. Recent studies [1,3,14] have considered how people negotiate access to personalized spaces and adopt roles that help achieve comfortable interactions.

The main emphasis in prior work has been on dynamics of host-guest relationships, accompanied with the occasional remark that encounters do not necessarily take place in host-guest dyads: people often share their homes with others who may get involved in hosting more or less voluntarily. This paper examines the dynamics of hosting together with other household members from the perspective of account sharing. Couchsurfing.org embraces account sharing in that whenever new members set up a profile on the site, they are given an opportunity to indicate that the profile represents ‘several people’. The opportunity to create a profile that explicitly represents more than one person makes the site an opportune location for examining how small groups (here, households of more than one person) negotiate presenting themselves and their home to the profile is best suited for individual users.

Couchsurfing.org profiles serve to present two interwoven but distinguishable aspects of households: the domestic space and the people who live in it. The main part of the profile is taken up by personal information, including (1) brief items, such as age, gender, occupation, location, where one grew up, and since when one has been a member of the community; (2) free-length verbal descriptions of one’s preferred ways of participating in the Couchsurfing community, one’s couchsurfing experiences, as well as interests, and (3) photos. The profile contains an SNS-style list of Couchsurfing.org friends, and finally but crucially, the references one has received, categorized in a table both according to whether the feedback is positive, neutral, or negative, and in terms of whether it has been given by visitors, hosts, or people met while traveling. Although it is technically possible to make a profile for representing ‘several people’, the structure of the profile is best suited for individual users.

As for hosting, profiles require members to indicate whether they have ‘a couch’ available, whether they can host at the moment, and, if so, provide more information on the type of accommodation they have to offer. A free text field titled ‘Couch Information’ is used not just to describe the space but also to communicate expectations and restrictions, such as the appropriate length of stay or the maximum number of surfers welcome at a time.

**MATERIAL AND METHOD**

This paper presents results from a qualitative case study consisting of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with altogether sixteen people (eight women and eight men) from eight households of more than one people (heterosexual couples, housemates, and a heterosexual family with a child) who offer to host couchsurfers. Participants’ ages ranged from 10 to 56 years, with most participants in their mid to late twenties. One of the couples was initially interviewed with the purpose of piloting the interview procedure. Since no major changes were made to the procedure after the pilots, it was deemed appropriate to include transcripts of these interviews in the analysis.

Apart from pilot interviewees (contacted through the author’s colleagues), all interviewees were recruited through direct messages to Couchsurfing profile owners whose profiles were listed as ‘several people’. The interviews took place in two metropolitan areas in the USA in July and August 2012. They were conducted in the participants’ homes (apart from the over-the-phone pilot interviews). The interviews ranged from 30 to 70 minutes in length. Each interviewee received $20 as compensation for participation. All interviews were conducted and transcribed in English.

The interview transcripts were analyzed by first searching for all mentions of participants’ Couchsurfing accounts and practices relating to them. This subset of the research material was, then, categorized further, narrowing in on notions of (1) setting up and maintaining profiles, (2)
handling CouchRequests, and (3) writing and receiving references after hosting couchsurfers. Finally, the interview sections classified to each of these categories were open-coded to understand how households deal with different aspects of hosting couchsurfers. The coding was focused on how members of households divided responsibilities, how they cooperated with one another, and what kinds of reasoning and criteria they expressed for the choices they made in the course of hosting. The names used in conjunction with interview excerpts are pseudonyms, used to protect the participants’ anonymity.

The material provides rich detail about participating households but there are two key limitations that should be kept in mind in considering the findings. First, the study builds on a convenience sample that is limited to people living in urban metropolitan areas in the USA. Thus, the findings are not generalizable as a broader depiction of how hosts or guests use Couchsurfing.org. Second, although the material includes different types of households, ranging from self-defined domestic partnerships to a set of housemates, it is not in the scope of this study to systematically address how different types of households may differ in how their members think about and act on issues related to account sharing. Third, the study focuses on hosting. As such, it does not speak to account sharing challenges specific to staying as a guest, although members from six households had couchsurfing experience, too.

FINDINGS

Presenting Multiple People in a Single Profile

On Couchsurfing.org, profiles serve to present households both in terms of the domestic space and the people who live in it. While the site allows for stating explicitly that a profile represents more than one person, participants deemed it difficult to construct their profiles in a way that would speak coherently for everyone in the household. Christina, who lives with her partner and daughter, explained how Couchsurfing.org falls short in supporting account sharing:

“Right now, it’s just male, female, or multiple people. And then you can put multiple pictures or you can describe, but there’s no way to actually say we are this person, this person and this person. And not all of us have a way to log in and see the site unless we just share my login.”

Christina’s account illustrates how treating ‘several people’ as a straightforward unit can be problematic and discourage equal participation.

Next to presenting the hosts to potential guests, profiles are used to communicate expectations and restrictions. Profiles are critical for structuring a household’s Couchsurfing experiences since they have an impact on the requests the household receives. Given this power, it is important to understand how households create and maintain their profiles, and how design shapes these choices.

Three couples had created their profiles together from scratch. In two other instances, an individual in each household reported having been in charge of setting up the profile, assuming the responsibility to craft the presentation of the entire household. Showcasing how account sharing is welcomed but not fully supported on the site, a further three households reported challenges related to repurposing an initially individual account for shared use. Prateek had created his Couchsurfing profile before moving in with his partner, Jane. The couple found it difficult to turn an individual profile into a shared one. Prateek described how the profile was now an attempt to present both of them:

“I don’t think I have a photograph of her. […] The profile still says -- it’s still of me and it refers to her everywhere else. It’ll talk about me and my partner, Jane.”

However, now that Jane was increasingly involved in couchsurfing, she explained why she and Prateek decided to repurpose the profile to represent her, too:

“I realize that I might also be traveling [...] I realized it might help for me also to have my name on the profile, just so that I can link to it.”

The household consisting of unrelated individual housemates offered a contrast to the cooperativeness of couples. The housemates conceived of profile maintenance as a more individual activity and, unlike most participants, did not share account credentials. Next to Kevin whose profile was used for hosting, Matt had a personal profile that he used when travelling. It is important to bear in mind that multi-person households vary in their preferences and practices when it comes to account sharing.

To sum up, most participating households had an individual in charge of interacting with the website on behalf of everyone. In some cases, other household members had not seen the site or knew little of its features. This need not mean that they do not act actively as hosts by interacting with guests or shouldering other hosting tasks, only that they had little to do with managing the account online.

Negotiating over Access to Domestic Spaces

In setting up a profile, even one that is explicitly about ‘several people’, Couchsurfing allows for inserting only one e-mail address to which the system forwards messages, such as CouchRequests, that other members send to profile owner(s). Messages can be read directly on the website, too. Many households shared credentials in order to provide multiple people with access to the profile and messages. In practice, though, receiving messages to an e-mail inbox was a functionality participants relied on, as it spared them the effort of checking yet another account separately.

Being able to redirect incoming messages only to one e-mail address enforced the tendency for one individual to become a gatekeeper to the household’s account. To overcome the issue, Kate and Jeff, a recently married couple, had created a separate e-mail account with the sole
task of forwarding redirected messages to their primary e-mail addresses. This allowed both partners equal access to messaging. As Jeff explained, this was a priority for the couple since, for them, hosting was pronouncedly a shared activity:

“We definitely always look at the request and talk about it together […] I don’t think one of us would say yes or no to someone before we had talked about it.”

It was, however, more common that the person receiving the messages forwarded them to others or brought them up with them in face-to-face conversations. Jane described how she and Prateek tend to handle requests:

“Yeah usually the way we do it is he checks the account, but he sends me the details and then we discuss whether those days work and then I respond to him and he writes back and then he starts cc’ing me on any email exchanges he has.”

While some reported forwarding all messages diligently, in other cases the person in charge filtered CouchRequests and brought only part of the requests into shared consideration. Christina explained that she curates carefully which CouchRequests to bring into discussion with her partner, a somewhat reluctant host. She engaged in this filtering as a strategy to make hosting more meaningful for her partner and, thus, to keep receiving couchsurfers in their home – an activity she found very enjoyable. Furthermore, Christina made an interesting distinction between asking for permission from her partner and offering notice to her daughter. According to Christina, the latter enjoyed having visitors around and, as a result, there was not really a need to consult with her as for who could be invited to stay.

It was typical for the participating households to drop hosting if there was a disagreement over whether to host. In making decisions over whether to accept a request, hosts considered primarily whether the timing of a proposed visit worked for them and whether the requester seemed like a person they would like to meet. Participants evaluated potential guests based on how the request was phrased, what the requester’s profile looked like, and, especially, what kind of references s/he had received and given. These priorities highlight the importance of references.

Establishing a Trustworthy Reputation
As references provided and received after visits accumulate members’ reputation within the Couchsurfing network, they affect members’ chances to couchsurf as well as to host. Jeff and Kate had agreed to share the important task of writing references. They said that they might just discuss what kind of a reference to give for a recent visitor, and then one of them would go and write it. Jeff explained that it was more likely, though, that they would end up writing it together:

“Yeah, I would guess that we’d probably write it, because I bet, like, if we had a really fun time, then we would probably want to, like, sit together, and say, oh, this was fun, that was fun, and write about it. And if we were like, a little peeved, then I think we would want to, like, talk together about how to be polite but also be honest.”

In most cases, though, the person in charge of the account assumed responsibility of writing references, as well. In some households, others knew little about references. During the interviews, Christina asked both her partner and her daughter whether they “even know that I write references”. Both responded that they had seen references in the profiles of potential visitors. They had, however, not really considered providing references as something they or their household members would do, too. Similarly, Mike’s partner Daniela stated that the interview was “the first time I’m hearing about feedback”. Not knowing what kind of a reputation one’s household has online may be problematic, for instance, by lessening opportunities to benefit from a good reputation accumulated through joint hosting efforts.

DESIGNING FOR SHARED USE
While Couchsurfing.org allows users to set up ‘several people’ profiles, the site is limited in its support of account sharing. The structure of profiles is not convenient for presenting multiple people, nor is the messaging system set up to encourage multiple profile owners to cooperate in handling requests on the site. Examination of what it means to use a single account as a multi-person household revealed that core challenges users face include presentation of multiple people in one profile, coordination of negotiations over access to domestic space, and representing in a fair way the reputation hosts have accumulated together over time so that all household members have an opportunity to benefit of joint hosting efforts. While it may not be possible, or even desirable, to ‘design away’ all of the messiness of engaging in network hospitality as a multi-person household, it is worthwhile to consider both designing for shared use and the tradeoffs related to such alternative design choices.

Shared Profiles and Reputation
While participation on Couchsurfing.org does not strictly require reciprocity, positive references on a profile serve to establish a reputation for the profile owners, casting them as good community members who are safe to interact with and worthy of being hosted based on the hospitality they have offered to others. Thus, a profile that showcases positive references is likely to increase its owners’ success in requesting a place to stay (or in receiving visitors to host). The study found participants struggling with how to present multiple people in a single profile and, especially, how to repurpose originally individual profiles for shared use. Household members who are not visibly represented in a shared profile may end up with fewer opportunities to benefit from the household’s jointly accumulated reputation, for instance when traveling independently.
Furthermore, current design provides little assistance for transferring reputation to a new context. The research material does not include examples of how households manage accounts when they grow apart, probably due to sampling only ‘several people’ profiles and due to interviewing participants only at one point in time. Yet, such changes, too, are an inevitable part of social life: housemates move in and out, couples may break up, and as children grow up, they tend to leave their childhood homes. This introduces challenges on Couchsurfing.org, for instance in terms of continuing participation as a reputed member after a life change, but the consequences could be much more troubling in other systems that use the social and economic value of reputation more systematically as a condition for participation and related benefits.

One way to rethink multi-person profiles would be to design them as collections of components that can be combined and decomposed as needed – much like pieces of a small puzzle. Next to a joint part, dedicated to representing the domestic space and other shared information specific to the household, each household member could have a personal component of their own. This would allow for distinguishing between the particular offer of hosting guests in a specific setup and the more permanent identities of the participating individuals.

Portable personal profile components would equip users with means to go through life changes without needing to recreate their profiles from scratch. This affordance would be valuable in systems where reputation metrics are important and affect opportunities for participation, such as Couchsurfing.org. Such a design could mitigate some of the issues around representing everyone involved. Also, it could help make profile components more durable over time, leading to more lasting self-presentations and reputation metrics. However, there are some important trade-offs to consider. The proposed structure could make the system more complicated to use, and it might even discourage participation if household members with lesser interest in the activity were forced to engage with online aspects of hosting. Finally, people may have good reasons for wanting a fresh start. If re-using personal parts of profiles became a norm, this option might be less readily available. As such, it would seem advisable to make the re-use of profile components an option, not a requirement.

Shared Access and Awareness

Some participants were not contented with the affordances Couchsurfing.org provides for cooperative coordination. For instance, allowing users to redirect their messages to only one e-mail address had pushed participants to create varied practices to ensure sufficient shared awareness of the household’s communication with other members of the Couchsurfing community. When it comes to facilitating cooperation among multiple household members who are sharing an account, however, seemingly easy fixes, such as allowing multiple redirect addresses, may introduce inadvertent challenges. Group-level coordination is not an issue that could be ‘solved by design’. Here, it would seem recommendable to simply provide users with the option of redirecting messages to multiple e-mail addresses.

Users’ preferences and practices are contextual and vary from group to group. When it comes to practices of account sharing, no single design will fit the needs of all households. It is preferable to provide account owners with meaningful choice, helping them make decisions that suit their particular needs: On Couchsurfing.org, some households are comfortable with delegating authority over the account to an individual gatekeeper. Others would appreciate mechanisms that provide all household members with equal access to the account.

Beyond the particular functionalities of Couchsurfing.org, asking people to consider clearly articulated choices when they are setting up a shared account in an online system could help them reflect on and discuss together how to handle their account. For example, Couchsurfing.org could help mitigate the challenges of coordinating hosting activities via a shared account by explicating more clearly the choices households need to make in engaging with the community as a small group. Next to options from which to select in setting up a profile, the setup process could be accompanied with a short list of issues household members should agree upon and examples of how others have resolved them. The list could include topics such as who maintains the profile, how decisions over whom to host are made, and who answers messages and writes references.

CONCLUSION

Challenges of account sharing in the context of hospitality exchange include (1) presenting multiple people with a single profile, (2) coordinating and negotiating how the household responds to requests it receives, and (3) sharing the benefits of a good reputation in a fair way.

While Couchsurfing was selected as a study site as an especially illustrative example of what is at stake in account sharing, the issues raised in this paper are not confined to the system or even to other similar non-monetary networked hospitality exchange services, such as Bewelcome and Hospitality Club. Further parallels can be found, for instance, from sites like Airbnb\(^4\) and Bizpora\(^5\) that help people monetize their willingness to make domestic spaces available to others. Here, too, the need to negotiate with other household members over access to domestic spaces may arise, with the added question of how the exchange of money between hosts and visitors affects the dynamics of the situation. Beyond the scope of physical space, similar issues are important for other ‘collaborative consumption’ systems that facilitate, for instance, local

\(^4\) https://www.airbnb.com/

\(^5\) https://www.bizpora.com/
online exchange or ridesharing. Here, sharing and exchanging can concern goods that are co-owned by multiple people. Questions of accumulating a reputation and achieving satisfactory coordination of exchange activities are of crucial importance also in this context.

On Couchsurfing.org, members may face challenges due to the scarce support for account sharing, for example in how to continue participation as a reputed member after a life change. However, consequences could be much more troubling in other systems that use the social and economic value of reputation more systematically as a condition for access to participation and other valued resources. Further analysis is needed, among others, of how account sharing practices in the context of non-monetary network hospitality differ from those related to hospitality exchanges that involve monetary transactions, such as the activities facilitated by Airbnb and Bizpora.

Another topic for future study is analyzing systematically whether and how different types of households differ in terms of their preferences and practices for account sharing. It would also be worthwhile to scrutinize account sharing practices in systems other than Couchsurfing.org to better understand how challenges related to account sharing differ in different communities and how they are shaped by differing user interfaces. Also, it remains an open question how well these findings that are related to the sharing of physical space can be applied to the sharing of other types of resources, such as cars, bikes, or other tangible items.

Amidst the rising rhetoric of a ‘reputation economy’ [see, e.g. 2], we need to engage in a conversation over the inclusions, exclusions, and inequalities that reputation metrics may renew or create, especially if they fail to acknowledge people’s account sharing practices. This paper calls for adopting a design focus beyond individuals in order to unlock the potential for catering to users’ goals and needs in maintaining shared accounts and in interacting with others through them. This is an increasingly critical issue as systems that facilitate network hospitality and other forms of collaborative consumption permeate the everyday lives of a growing number of people.

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