

**EXPLORING THE ROLE OF VIRTUAL NETWORKS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF
“INTIMATE TOURISM”
The Case of Couchsurfing**

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Technological advances have largely contributed to modify modern travel practices through the integration of a more extensive number of actors and places. The presence of digital social networks (such as Facebook and Twitter) seems to have reached a preferential place in people's life by generating more instantaneous interactions. In the case of tourism, these networks have proven use specially for promotion, commercialisation and satisfaction purposes. This article presents information related to the functioning of a digital network that helps in the construction of contemporary travel practices. The social network analysed is “Couchsurfing.com”; this network was created under the premise of connecting people to offer/obtain a place to stay overnight for free. This network has grown considerably and the main idea behind it is related to non-for-profit endeavours. This work uses the concept of Paula Bialsky (2007) of “Intimate Tourism” in order to test its adaptability in this research context. The main areas investigated were intimacy, social interaction and motivation. The results point out towards a complex panorama of travel practices through this network that goes beyond the simple economic motivation. The main conclusion of this study is that travellers participating in this network wish to provoke meaning ful interactions with local people within destinations, allowing them to stop being passive actors as well as to create memorable travel experiences.

KEY WORDS: *tourism, couchsurfing, social networks, Guanajuato, México.*