

“But hitchhiking is DANGEROUS!”



How Hitchhikers Cope with the Pressures and
Perceived Dangers of Hitchhiking by Society

A Literature Review and Qualitative Interviews

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Course: Capstone

Academic Year: 2018 - 2019

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Number of Words: 17.902

Version: 08 - 09 - 2019

Recommended referencing style:

Veldwijk, I.T. (2019) "But hitchhiking is DANGEROUS!" - How Hitchhikers Cope with the Pressures and Perceived Dangers of Hitchhiking by Society. *Mind of a Hitchhiker/Maastricht University*. Retrieved from: <https://mindofahitchhiker.com/thesis>

Abstract:

Many individuals across cultures hold the belief that hitchhiking is a very dangerous activity. Though the subject is widely ignored by the academic community, there is no evidence that hitchhiking is more dangerous than other accepted methods of transportation. This research set out to find how hitchhikers cope with this pervasive belief, and if they negotiate it. Through literature review, this paper establishes where this belief in the dangers of hitchhiking stem from, using both the fields of neuropsychology and cultural studies. Furthermore, I conducted semi-structured, qualitative interviews with experienced (solo) hitchhikers (N = 5). Through their stories, I managed to establish their narrative of danger perception and how they deal with the poor reputation hitchhiking has in society. The findings were that hitchhikers mostly ignore the popular view, as they find that many people aren't open to listen to things that don't conform to their worldview. In very rare cases, the hitchhikers try to negotiate or change people's views, mostly by telling their own experiences. The conclusion also contains some suggestions for hitchhikers to regain control over their narrative.

Keywords: hitchhiking, fear, risk, irrationality, common-sense, psychology, the effect of news, interpretation, worldview, cognitive bias, portrayal, representation, counter-culture, narrative control, coping mechanisms.

Acknowledgements: I'd like to thank Jonas Breuer for translating my German sources, acting as my sounding board and helping me develop a persuasive carrot-and-stick tactic. I'm very grateful for the cooperation by my five interviewees, both those that I met before and those that I spoke to for the first time. My family has also helped me by showing interest, giving pep-talks, and helping me refine my research. My grandmother also played a pivotal role in providing me an ambient place to write, with tea. A final thanks to Jeroen Moes, who advised me very positively during the process.

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Prologue

During the Ride...

A hitchhiker gets picked up at the on-ramp to a highway somewhere in Europe. The driver is alone in the car. The hitchhiker held a sign with a destination one city further than where the driver is going. A distance too far to make a detour to for the driver - who is in no hurry - but close enough to still make it before nightfall for the hitchhiker. Therefore, the hitchhiker would need to switch rides after this driver. The driver is from the country and the region they're in, while the hitchhiker is from a different country. They speak different first languages, but they communicate through English without any problems. The hitchhiker is younger than the driver, but the hitchhiker is above the age of 20. The following conversation takes place.

Driver: Oh child! You still have to go *all* the way to the other city! Let me drop you off at the bus station in my city.

Hitchhiker: There is no need. The distance is not that far and I can still make it before sunset by hitchhiking. I'd prefer it if you could drop me off at this gas station on the highway before you enter your city. This way you don't have to make a detour to drop me off somewhere nice.

Driver: What about the train station? There are direct trains from here to the other city. I will drop you off at the train station.

Hitchhiker: Please don't do that. I'd really prefer to be dropped off at that gas station I know you will pass. It's really much faster and easier for me.

Driver: I can pay for your ticket! Surely then you will want to take the train or bus?

Hitchhiker: Thank you for the offer, but it's really not about money. I just prefer to hitchhike. The gas station is really the best.

The hitchhiker checks their GPS map. From their current position, the gas station is only 25 kilometers away now. The driver is driving 120 kilometers per hour. Within 20 minutes the hitchhiker will need to leave the car.

Driver: But hitchhiking is so dangerous! I can't let you out at that gas station I'm very familiar with. *I just can't let you do that.*

Hitchhiker: It's really OK to let me out there. I've been hitchhiking for a long time already. I know how to keep myself safe and I don't say yes to every ride I get offered.

Driver: No. Hitchhiking is not safe. And you can't get safely into a stranger's car.

Hitchhiker: You and me are strangers, right? Are you dangerous?

Driver: No, of course I'm not dangerous. It's *the others* that are dangerous.

Hitchhiker: How can you be so sure of that? How can I be sure that *you* are not dangerous to me? You sure talk a lot about danger for someone who claims to not be dangerous.

Driver: Because a hitchhiker was murdered in this country. They were also foreign. I'm not dangerous because I have a family, a job, a house.

Hitchhiker: And a car. Many other people with cars have a house, a job, and a family. The far majority. When did this hitchhiker get murdered? And where?

Driver: They were killed 22 years ago in a city on the other end of this country. The person was lost and got offered a ride by some stranger. It was all over the news for weeks. As a reaction, our municipality closed down its hitchhiking spot. When I saw you on the on-ramp I didn't know whether to pick you up, but then I thought of this other hitchhiker and knew I had to bring you to safety. They never caught the guy, you know?

Hitchhiker: But this story took place such a long time ago. Back then there weren't any smartphones, telephone towers, GPS. All of this increased everyone's safety. I can call my

friends or even the police from anywhere now, and I'm never lost. Hitchhiking really is quite safe when you know what you're doing. Tell me, did you ever have a bad experience at that gas station up ahead? Did you ever feel unsafe there?

Driver: No, I go there all the time. Even late at night I feel safe there. The gas station has cameras, street lights, and clean toilets. The coffee is really good. But for you it's not safe.

It's only 10 kilometers to the gas station now.

Hitchhiker: Why wouldn't it be safe there for me too?

Driver: Because someone will hurt you. It's different. You're young.

Hitchhiker: I'm not that young. And I'm very, very careful. But I don't think strangers are generally out to hurt people. Do you think taking a taxi is unsafe?

Driver: No, taking a taxi is very safe. I often take a taxi when I go out with my friends in the city. When I drink I take the taxi home. Drinking and driving is unsafe.

Hitchhiker: I agree, drinking and driving is very dangerous. But taking a taxi? Alone? Drunk?

Driver: Yes alone and drunk in a taxi, why?

Hitchhiker: Don't you think it's terribly unsafe to get into a stranger's car when you're intoxicated? Do you check on GPS where the taxi driver is taking you?

Driver: No I never follow the route the taxi driver takes. I just trust that *he* knows the route to my address.

Hitchhiker: So you even tell a stranger where you live? This sounds extremely dangerous to me. The taxi driver probably knows the city better than you. What if he takes you to a deserted area and hurts you? Why do you trust this strange man with your life?

Driver: Because he has a taxi license. Someone from the taxi company trusted this man. Other people have gotten into his taxi before. If he was a bad man who took advantage of his customers, I'm sure the police would have caught him.

Hitchhiker: So instead of being vigilant of your own safety, you trust that someone else would take care of yours? Blindly? This seems reckless.

Driver: I've never thought about it like that. But people take taxis everyday. And there are barely any stories in the news about taxi drivers hurting their customers in my area.

Hitchhiker: But more often than once in 22 years?

Driver: Yes, actually there was a story last month about a taxi driver punching a customer.

Hitchhiker: But it's *hitchhiking* that is dangerous?

They drive past a sign that indicates the gas station. It's three hundred — two hundred — one hundred meters away. The off-ramp appears.

1. Introduction

Hitchhikers are an under-researched group of people (Chesters and Smith, 2001; Wechner, 2002). Even though hitchhikers have been around for a long time - longer than most imagine - data is scarce (Wechner, 2002; Wechner, 1996; Swartz, 2012; Hitchwiki.org, 2018). For a worldwide phenomenon with a worldwide group of practitioners (Hitchwiki.org, 2018), it's peculiar that academics haven't paid much attention.

The act of 'hitchhiking' itself appears to be misunderstood by the majority of non-practitioners; they often think it's extremely dangerous, are fearful of it, or at the very least show some uneasiness about the topic (Chesters and Smith, 2001). Even though hitchhiking has much potential to solve inefficiency problems such as empty cars and traffic congestion, and should logically be supported by policymakers, hitchhiking has been in decline since the last century (Compagni Portis, 2015; Chesters and Smith, 2001).

Nonetheless, there are still many people who use hitchhiking as a method of transportation. While they're hitchhiking, they face many biases and prejudices from non-hitchhikers - be it drivers or other people. There seems to be a fundamental misunderstanding between the two groups, about what it is one group is actually doing; one group thinks hitchhiking is an impossibly great way to risk one's life (Compagni Portis, 2015), while the hitchhikers think the risk is either not present, manageable or calculable, or more nuanced than a society's culture of fear allows its citizens to feel.

This cultural narrative of hitchhiking is more like a reflex than a well thought-out concept; upon asking non-hitchhikers more questions, they are often unable to explain *why* exactly hitchhiking is so dangerous. "It's just extremely dangerous" is often the response, and any further dialogue becomes impossible.

This paper aims to explore the basis of danger assessment of non-hitchhikers through psychology and cultural study. Then I'll ask hitchhikers how - even though they've been raised in this same culture - they perceive the supposed danger in hitchhiking. Hopefully, making the differences in thinking between the two groups very specific will help us reach a better understanding of danger perception and choices made by the individual, which will at the same time be the contribution of this thesis.

1.1 Research Question

The guiding question in this paper will be:

How do hitchhikers cope with the perceptions from non-hitchhikers that what they're doing is extremely dangerous?

Some sub-questions that will guide the search for an answer are: How do non-hitchhikers come to the conclusion that hitchhiking is 'extremely dangerous'? How does this attitude become cemented in culture/society? How do hitchhikers interpret the culturally implied risk in hitchhiking? Why is the discrepancy between the two so big?

1.2 Definitions

Before we continue, a definition of 'to hitchhike' is needed. The Cambridge definition hitchhiking is "to travel by getting free rides in someone else's vehicle". This definition needs some nuance and clarification: hitchhiking is not always free in every country, which is mostly dependent on the hitchhiker's communication and negotiation skills. Speaking in very broad strokes, hitchhiking is *always free* in North West Europe and North America. But 'being free' is not the most essential element, and doesn't take into account the various ways in which a hitchhiker brings value to the driver. An element that's more essential to hitchhiking is the fact that driver and hitchhikers are strangers, and that the ride is taken spontaneously. This excludes the situation of getting a free ride from your mom on a previously specified date and time. Also carpooling, carpooling apps (like BlaBlaCar), and the (often government-approved) 'slugging', are excluded from the definition since it's not spontaneous, or can only be done in specific areas to qualify. If a hitchhiker hitches with the same driver twice (a very rare occurrence), it's still hitchhiking as there was no expectation of a free ride with that exact driver.

This paper uses the word 'hitchhiking' as an activity, but the word behind it, namely 'hitchhiker' is implied in the word. There is no hitchhiking without hitchhiker, even if someone only does it once.

1.3 The Statistics

The statistics on the actual dangers of hitchhiking, - however little statistics are out there - indicate that it's a rather safe method of transportation. The two major works of research I'm basing these statements on are from the state of California in the USA, and the federal state of Hesse in Germany (California Highway Patrol, 1974; Fiedler *et al.*, 1989). Both are very dated, but their contents agree on the main point: hitchhiking is not particularly dangerous.

The German study found that "The crime dangers of hitchhiking play a subordinate role against all representations on the part of the police and the media. Rather, the bad experiences are dominated by traffic-related problems." (Fiedler *et al.*, 1989:184. Translated). They explicitly asked student-hitchhikers for their bad experiences.

The focus of the Californian study lay on accidents and crimes involving hitchhikers. The number of accidents and crimes when hitchhiking was compared to the number of accidents and crimes in total in the state of California. The researchers, therefore, weren't intending to establish whether hitchhiking is safe or dangerous. It concluded: "[...], the results of this study do not show that hitchhikers are over represented in crimes or accidents beyond their numbers." A more journalistic, investigative research based off the California Highway Patrol data and other USA-sourced data has been done by Swartz (2012). He concluded that the likelihood of being killed or raped while hitchhiking in the USA is 0.0000089%. On the question 'is hitchhiking dangerous?' his succinct answer is: "Considerably less than we've been told" and "You're far more likely to accidentally shoot yourself or fall down and die than to be killed hitchhiking" which seems like a USA-based problem not generalizable to other countries.

In more detail, both quantify that what people think is the biggest danger in hitchhiking - i.e. murder or rape - is a rather slim chance. The biggest risk lies in being run over since for many hitchhiking practices (like 'thumbing') it is required to stand close to the road where cars drive at various speeds.

One could argue that the data is too old to be of use. But even so, if anything, it's safer to hitchhike today than in 1989 or before. On the whole, the world has become much safer (Pinker, 2018). Technological advancements such as the spread of telecommunication, improved infrastructure, and lawmaking to prevent car accidents all contribute to hitchhiker's increased safety.

The reader now has three choices: 1) accept that the numbers say that hitchhiking is not particularly dangerous, 2) accept that the quantitative data is too old or lacking to draw any reasonable conclusion on whether hitchhiking is extremely dangerous or not, or 3) not accept the fundamental assumptions of this thesis, maintain the belief that hitchhiking is impossibly dangerous, and stop reading.

1.4 Methodology

This research has been conducted mostly through literature review and intersectional discourse analysis. Unfortunately, the term 'hitchhiking' has been appropriated¹ by other fields of study - i.e. the field of genetics - making it a very difficult keyword to research academic articles. This only underlines my first point, the one that says that hitchhikers are an under-researched group of people. This literature review took place in two fields: psychology (including medical) and cultural studies (including narrative). The use and importance of using both will become clear after chapter 2 and 3.

The second method in my research has been conducting interviews. In particular, qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with actual hitchhikers from various backgrounds. I asked them about their views and motivations to hitchhike. At this point, I must also mention that epistemologically speaking, I'm part of the group of 'hitchhikers', and not merely an outsider wanting to look in. This gave me certain advantages to speak to people, who understand that even though our experiences may be different, we have a common basis of understanding. The field in which this research takes place is mostly sociology. The introduction of chapter 4 contains more information on my approach and actual methods of interviewing.

This qualitative interviewing method and focus on the hitchhiker's lived experiences reflects my own beliefs about research; that there is no absolute truth, that the researcher matters, that subjectivity is great, that we are our own experts and should be believed as such, and that everything is under constant change (and that's a good thing). All these things put together amount to something like feminist phenomenology. I use these words with reserve since I'm a novice at using them and don't want to hold up any pretension about the actual extent of my knowledge and experience. This - if the reader hasn't noticed yet - is also the reason this paper might read more 'informal' for the academic setting its been made for; I, as a

¹ On a different note, this appropriation is also symbolic for the ever-decreasing space hitchhiking takes up in our culture, academia being a contributing factor for its decline.

researcher, am not invisible (Harding, 1988:9). This - to me - seems like a sufficiently consistent frame to proceed with.

Though it seems messy and methodologically unsound to use three fields and two approaches, it makes sense for the topic of this thesis. The idea is to first cast out a wide net for the reader and then distill a logical conclusion from those diverse ingredients. The reader will likely intuitively understand the use of these three angles by the conclusion of this paper.

One criticism the reader may express is the use of undifferentiated sources on their geographical location: I've used academic research from North-America, Europe, and other parts of the world indiscriminately and with near-total disregard for cultural differences. This is because 1) in some cases it didn't matter where the research came from (e.g. in neuroscience) because of their methods, 2) I deemed the cultural differences small enough to use all of them in this research, and 3) the researchers themselves often didn't indicate the geographical and cultural situatedness of their research - which is undoubtedly a weakness of their research and not mine. Also, hitchhiking is a worldwide phenomenon and I've given my best to interview a geographically well-spaced-out group of hitchhikers.

Now, having established that hitchhiking *is* a safe mode of transportation, it's time to look into why many non-hitchhikers hold the belief that it *isn't* safe. The following two chapters cover human psychology (nature) and culture, in search of an answer. It's important to note here that since the two fields inform each other, the order of appearance is random and doesn't imply cause and effect.

2. The Psychology of Fear

'Fear' and 'anxiety' are emotions experienced by both humans and other species (Öhman, 2008:710). While 'fear' and 'anxiety' have many similarities, the difference between them is that 'fear' deals with "a known or understood threat" whereas 'anxiety' relates to "unknown or poorly defined threats (Ankrom, 2018; Öhman, 2008:724). For the purpose of this paper, I'm using these terms rather interchangeably as I'm not a psychologist; I can't ascertain which emotion non-hitchhikers experience about hitchhiking with authority.

This chapter contains a quick introduction into the current understanding of the psychology of fear and its neurobiological origins. This basic understanding of fear as an emotion and evolutionary survival tool will help us understand the defense mechanisms present in non-hitchhiking individuals with regards to hitchhiking. This is necessary to understand irrational fears and their persistence.

As a side note, psychology has improved a lot since its emergence as a field of study, but it is not without its faults. The main important flaw useful to keep in the backs of our minds in this paper is gender bias. Under patriarchy, women are supposed² to experience (constant) fear.

2.1 The Human Brain: Neurobiology

The amygdala is an anatomically defined area in the human brain that plays multiple roles. One very important role is the induction of fear into the individual, which leads this individual to experience fear as an emotion (Feinstein et al., 2011:1). Experiencing this emotion is pivotal to human survival, as it triggers the 'flight-or-fight' response (Edmundson, 2000). Damage in the amygdala may cause the absence of the emotion fear and the absence of a 'flight-or-fight' response.

Now, what has this to do with the fear (or anxiety) of hitchhiking? The direct rejection of non-hitchhikers of the idea of hitchhiking suggests a similar event in the brain. Though it's not a flight-or-fight response in itself, the imminent reaction seems to be as uninhibited and unchecked as such a base response. Even if society is biased to view those who do not fear the

² That is how you keep a population in check.

activity of hitchhiking as 'deviant', there is no evidence (nor studies) to suggest that hitchhikers have neither abnormal brains in general nor 'damaged' amygdalas in specific.

2.2 Picking Something to Fear - While Ignoring Another

In psychology and psychiatry, phobias are 'an extreme or irrational fear of or aversion to something' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), whereas in a cultural aspect they can mean something like a having a prejudice for something. The word 'irrational' is where I'd like to place the focus. While sometimes, the person experiencing irrational fear is aware that it's irrational, sometimes they are unaware. Informing someone that they are wrong often backfires, having people cement their false beliefs even more (Silverman, 2011; TruTV, 2018).

It's important to point out here that phobias are usually specific to an individual. When an irrational fear is held by a large group of people, we're talking about crowd psychology (Van de Sande, 2005). In social psychology, this behavior is influenced by the individual to the group and by the group to the individual. It's the psychological mechanism behind how cultural values are negotiated, upheld, and changed. We can understand society's aversion to hitchhiking as the prevailing mindset, while the hitchhikers are the individuals with a deviant mindset. Since the prevailing mindset has been around and virtually unchallenged for so long, the negative reaction is the psychological equivalence of a reflex: a conditioned response (Cherry, 2018).

Three popular examples of this are very pervasive in many cultures: shark attacks, plane crashes, and terrorist attacks. Especially the latter has a very slim chance of happening, especially in Europe and North America - where the fear of it seems very prevalent. For reference, the average person from that geography has a higher chance of dying from slipping in the shower. The *actual* chances of being involved in a terrorist attack are incredibly small, yet based on the off-chance that it happens, policymakers spend a lot of time, energy, and taxpayer money on 'preventative' policies. However, we don't see policymakers forcing shower producers to make their tubs anti-slip.

2.3 When Fear Speaks to the Imagination: Anomalies

Let's continue for a bit with the terrorism and slipping in the shower examples. Both are sudden. Why is one so bad, while the other kind of... acceptable? It's easy to point out that one is a crime with a perpetrator, and the other a faceless accident. The difference seems to lie in how

compelling one is as a story, an anomaly, and how the other does not speak to the imagination at all (Dubner, 2009). Speaking again for the same geographical area - North America and Europe - one could argue that the cultures are obsessed with violence perpetrated by people and technology (Shaw, 2018). Of those perpetrators, we only see the outcomes of their behaviors, not what precedes them. When reading about a terrorist, we don't use our skills to find nuance and empathy. Instead, we dehumanize and externalize. This kind of compartmentalization process provides the difference between justifiable paranoia on the one hand and madness on the other.

When reading about a hitchhiker becoming the victim of a crime, the mind makes a mental note of the word 'hitchhiker', not 'victim', even when the crime and context haven't been specified at all. The brain resorts to a "what would I do in that situation" and the learned answer is "I would not be in that situation. I would never hitchhike." which formulates the problem as lying with the victim, not the perpetrator, resulting in a complete role-reversal.

2.4 When Fear Becomes Policy: Stranger Danger and Schema

In cognitive psychology, a schema is "a pattern of thought or behavior that organizes categories of information and the relationships among them." (DiMaggio, 1997). While schemata can be reorganized, some of them are preconceived, or even (socially) conditioned (Davis, 1992). They often help the individual to make sense of the world around them. These can be in the form of behavioral scripts, which tell the individual what to do in a certain situation - much like a habit. This helps the individual eliminate decisions and helps formulate 'if-then' relationships (Sternberg and Sternberg, 2012). To come back to hitchhiking, a non-hitchhiking individual can simply build the script "hitchhiking is dangerous" or "if someone hitchhikes, bad things will happen to them". Therefore, the blurting out of "hitchhiking is dangerous!" by an individual who has never hitchhiked, has all the hallmarks of a schema.

Memory plays an important role in these schemata. When confronted with information about hitchhiking the non-hitchhiker has to retrieve this script from their 'semantic' memory, defined as "general world knowledge" (Sternberg and Sternberg, 2012). Semantic Memory is differentiated from 'episodic' memory, which "stores personally experienced events or episodes". Individuals who are hitchhikers do have episodic memory of experiencing³

³ As a side note, it would be interesting to interview ex-hitchhikers, one group who finds hitchhiking dangerous (again) and another that deems it not dangerous. It would be interesting to see whether years of not hitchhiking helps the individual re-invest into the behavioral script (or 'cultural narrative') of "hitchhiking is dangerous!".

hitchhiking, therefore they don't need to cognitively resort to the culturally embedded script of "hitchhiking is dangerous". When confronted by the semantic memory of non-hitchhikers, hitchhikers may feel the urge to be defensive about hitchhiking, by saying "hitchhiking is safe!", but that is just a new schema.

The USA's (and beyond) policy of 'stranger danger' is one such example of the normalization and institutionalization of fear. (Stokes, 2009). As children are considered the most vulnerable group of society, that society largely agrees upon needs protection, this policy came into life - with the best of intentions. Its contents were simple: teach children through public service announcements and the like that unknown adults are unsafe individuals to interact with. The rhyming phrase "stranger danger" is easy to remember, even for a child. Whole generations grew up mistrusting strangers, and its effects are long term, even life-long. It's no surprise that hitchhiking went into decline (Compagni Portis, 2015: 98). Changes in infrastructure accessibility and law made hitchhiking on the highways illegal (Dalmas, 2013). At the height of the attacks on hitchhiking through policy, both drivers and hitchhikers were discouraged from engaging in the activity through public service announcements and the like.

Now, to a lot of people, this looks like progress in society: these policies are supposed to protect people, increase safety, and decrease harm. But it was all wrong. It's very rare that a total stranger abducts or abuses a child, and rationally speaking, it's generally the people closest to them that a child should fear (Beam, 2007). The same goes for who is the perpetrator of sexual assault and rape (Dubner, 2009), which often misdirects women's fear to the unknown stranger, instead of family members or acquaintances (Jewkes and Letherby, 2002:125). This is of course not to say that strangers are to be trusted completely, but that the image is skewed. As Dubner (2009) puts it: "Most people are pretty terrible at risk assessment".

I'd like to end this chapter on a quote from Furedi (1997:124): "The consequences of educating children to fear strangers are also rarely placed under scrutiny. The equation of adult strangers with danger does little to protect the child. However, it provides an early lesson in cynicism about human nature."

3. The Cultural Narrative of Hitchhiking across Media

These psychological factors underlying the fear of hitchhiking in non-hitchhiking individuals don't operate alone; one very important accomplice is the culture that facilitates this fear. Culture itself is informed by many factors, but the two important ones for this research are 1) the news media, and 2) popular culture. Both play a role in the amplification of risk (Kasperson *et al.*, 1988), as the reader will see. Whereas psychology has *behavioral scripts* as explained in chapter 2, culture has *narrative* as a tool for organizing how we process and react to new information. Though emerging from a different field, I consider behavioral scripts and narratives each other's analogs. That is what this chapter 3 is all about.

While culture may be more 'malleable' than human psychology, it is also notoriously stuck in its own 'status quo'. The following section will analyze the general fear of hitchhiking from the perspective of media and culture. We will see that there is a popular narrative being created around hitchhiking, that leaves plenty of imaginative room for fear to run wild while restricting any questioning or amendment of this cultural 'status quo'. Both the news and other cultural artifacts like movies are complicit in its supremacy.

3.1. In The News

'The news' is a popular source of information for the people provided by journalists who produce it (Schudson, 1989). By many, the news is considered a reliable and 'accurate' source of current events, the state of the world, and other affairs, while others hold more skepticism. One such critique is that journalists manufacture opinion (Cohen and Young, 1973:97) and public opinion tends to reflect news coverage more than the actual rate of events (Cohen and Young, 1973:127). This skewed view is extremely problematic. The following points will discuss why and how that affects the popular narrative around 'hitchhiking is dangerous'.

3.1.1 News Bias: Sensationalism and Cultural Reproduction of Narrative

There is no 'objective' news; it changes from channel to channel, paper to paper (Cohen and Young, 1973:15). Moreover, news media have specific reasons to report bad stuff happening in the world: it's what the audience reads, clicks on, and what generates money. Sensationalism is everywhere and intrinsic to the medium and audience expectations. It reports all the bad things

happening in the world, but not the massive leaps of progress humanity has made (Pinker, 2018). In the case of hitchhiking: where are the news stories about the millions of times a hitchhiker arrives safely at their destination? That wouldn't be news. This is, of course, disappointing, but not surprising. The news media and its employees are stakeholders in the cultural reproduction of this narrative. If a news outlet decided to go against the prevailing mindset, it would get punished socially by the system it maintains.

Returning to the German research from the introduction (Fiedler *et al.*, 1989:128). The researchers asked 1.300 students which kind of media-coverage about hitchhiking they remembered. "In the media reports, as perceived by the interviewees, the general warnings about hitchhiking dangers prevail. Furthermore, about one-third of the content relates to serious crimes reported in connection with hitchhiking. Adding up these shares, 79.2% of the report content has an altogether negative tone. Leaving the general reports out of consideration, only 11.4% of positive statements about hitchhiking remain. From the point of view of the interviewees, the public image of the hitchhiking system is therefore largely associated with the dangers of hitchhiking." (Translated).

Comparing these numbers to the statistics shown in chapter 1.3, it becomes clear that the media grossly emphasized and sensationalized the bad stories, and therefore participated in spreading misinformation - even though that same misinformation led to the funding of the study. Comparing these numbers to the actual dangers, I'm referring you back to the 'Statistics' heading in the introduction.

3.1.2 Victim Blaming and Misrepresentation - Belief in a Just World (BJW)

If a hitchhiker gets involved in a crime in the role of a victim, journalists working for news media outlets quickly find blame⁴. That blame is often put on the hitchhiker, and not the perpetrator. This frames the hitchhiker as the problem of the crime and not the actual person committing the crime (be it robbery, rape, or murder). This is a pattern common to other forms of crime as well: women are often blamed for their rapes (Niemi and Young, 2014), gangbangers are often blamed for their murder (Gushue and Wong, 2018).

⁴ I would include some links to articles that do that, but that's a form of inductive reasoning. Besides, it is really bad for my mental state to read such articles as that makes me depressed and disappointed (in the news media, not the victims). Though I know some famous victims like Pippa Bacca by name, I'm not going to provide the reader with links, as a radical act of self-care in defiance of academic rigor. Anyone who wishes to find 'proof' of how the news media write about raped and/or murdered hitchhikers is free to perform a Google search for themselves.

The narrative is that there is a sense of foreseeability when people hitchhike; remember the 'if-then' schema from chapter 2. By this logic, the hitchhiker 'had it coming'. Victim blaming itself is an irrational behavior (Niemi and Young, 2014), which actively turns the victim into the perpetrator. This response is also typical of patriarchal society; when blaming individual victims instead of the perpetrator, we can allow ourselves not to see obvious patterns in who are the perpetrators, who are generally white men who hold power (Shaw, 2018). This helps the power structure of hegemonic masculinity go unchecked and unchallenged, and encourages perpetrators to reoffend.

Research done on intergroup relations toward outgroup victims also shows that the victim's social category matters with regard to how much the victim is to blame (Modesto and Pilati, 2017). As concluded in that study, not all forms of victimization threaten the 'belief in a just world' (BJW) of the interviewed ingroup individual. This means that an individual's response is directly related to their ability to relate to the victim, and that 'far away' victims don't threaten the individual's worldview.

Returning again to the German research (Fiedler *et al.*, 1989:181. Translated): "[The mythologically based role behavior] also makes those female hitchhikers who are not correspondingly 'disguised', already before and independently of a concrete offense, to socially legitimized victims. In this understanding, they are the real culprits, since they have 'seduced' the men to the later offense by their outward appearance", which is a direct form of gendered victim-blaming. Noting earlier in the same paper: "It's against the natural behavior of 'protection-needing women' to use such a form of mobility" and the pervasive idea that women "enjoy being 'hit on'", and that "resistance is something to be 'overcome'". Therefore, they're already "socially legitimized victims" (p.38-9). In other words, society says: *women, stay in your lane* - which is another way to reproduce patriarchal discourse. The research actually suggests a solution through a cultural shift in thinking both about women and about hitchhiking as a form of mobility (p.181-2).

3.1.3 Long-Term Effects of News Consumption

As people age, they will have consumed more news. This has an accumulative effect on the human mind, making it seem that the world is getting worse, not better (Chiricos *et al.*, 2000). The older people get, the more fearful they feel, as a consequence of this constant miscalibration of the true risks of various activities (Pinker, 2018). The view of society becomes

inadequate (Altheide, 1997). Though causation is not implied, the correlation between age and years of news consumption and the increased sense of insecurity seems like a - bold, yet - logical next step. As long as the human craving for news doesn't go away, these levels of misinformation will stay.

3.2 In Popular Culture

The news informs popular culture and vice versa. Though popular culture has a distinct way of influencing the masses from the news: entertainment. Both depictions in pop culture and the news influence the next generation of hitchhikers (Compagni Portis, 2015: 48). The dissemination of fear surrounding hitchhiking can be passed on through for example films, television, and books. For more analysis on the cultural shift and specific cases of negative pop culture portrayals, see the work of Compagni Portis (2015). Know that there are very few instances when hitchhiking gets portrayed as a value-neutral activity; that is more than just a means to an end, and can be a positive experience for the participants. Consumption of narrative media of this kind had a direct effect on hitchhiking as a practice and its practitioners.

3.2.1 Portrayals of Hitchhikers

The image of a hitchhiker is often a hygienically-challenged individual. They get called names like 'freeloaders', which is a term used against the socioeconomic underclass of society, along with the homeless. Note here that hitchhiking isn't an activity exclusively for the poor; in fact, many people from the middle and upper class participate in it. This relates back to the underlying fear of the proletariat in a capitalist society, the focus on human productivity, and the idea that there are limits to human freedom.

As Polston (2014:11) put in his study in of the decline of hitchhiking in the USA through the last century, it's "a freedom that comes with a price" and that it's a "freedom attached to a sense of responsibility". In this way, hitchhikers are contentious *because* society perceives them as not paying their dues and taking responsibility. This is what created the rift between the groups. A careful reader would note, though, that the particular obsession with 'freedom' is a major feature of USA national identity, as emphasized in songs like "America" by Simon & Garfunkel for example (Polston, 2014:55). But USA society is inherently socially stratified, and these walls between people are what induces the fear. The push and pull between safety and freedom, comfort and adventure, familiarity and novelty, and the *necessity* for the middle class

to be willing to pick up hitchhikers for hitchhiking to exist, reached a breaking point (Polstion, 2014:57).

Hitchhiking is also associated with youth and counterculture: rebelling against the system. In the end, behaviors that were acceptable when people are young are supposed to be dismissed in later life as a part of maturing.

3.2.2 Criminalization/Victimization of Hitchhikers

The plot device is simple: if you're hitchhiking, you're either a criminal or a victim. If the hitchhiker is a criminal, then the good-hearted driver becomes the victim, and should have known better than to help out a stranger. If the hitchhiker is a victim, then they had 'what was coming to them'. When we're not using *men* as the default of our analysis, then the gendered panic around women involving themselves with strangers - as driver or hitchhiker - becomes really obvious.

As narratologists Herman and Vervaeck (2005:50) put it: "Criminals are constantly associated with nature, heroes tend to be affiliated with culture, the city, and sophistication." The road is a strange place that is located somewhat in between the wilderness (nature) and the city (culture), and not truly part of either. The hitchhiker dwells in that zone, and certain types of drivers that often have a bad reputation (like truck drivers) reside there, too. When the hitchhiker is portrayed as the criminal, the 'cultured' driver becomes the victim.

When the criminal hitchhiker is female, an extra dimension of sexism is added: the idea that (white) women can be just as cunning and ruthless as violent men *while retaining the appearance of victimhood and innocence* is culturally terrifying. Especially when the female hitchhiker is conventionally attractive and/or dresses in a stereotypically provocative (i.e. 'should be a victim, not a perpetrator') way. This is because patriarchy doesn't allow for people to be two things at once, to be complex individuals.

In case the hitchhiker becomes a victim, different things are at play. The hitchhiker *must be* young and naive to trust people in this way. The hitchhiker relinquished control and gets awarded risk. 'Of course the hitchhiker gets picked up by a serial killer... rapists and serial killers prowl the roads looking for hitchhikers to victimize!' When the hitchhiker is male and the driver is male, the driver *of course* happens to be a closeted gay man. It's only when it's an easy catch like a hitchhiker that the driver sexually propositions the (heterosexual, *innocent*) hitchhiker. And *of course*, a driver like this doesn't respect the hitchhiker's refusal of consent - such is the reasoning of a homophobe.

When the hitchhiker is both a victim *and* female, she simply had it coming. The rules of victim-blaming get applied faster than you can say “Are you OK?”. Hitchhiking equals signing away your rights to safety and respectful treatment as an individual. Weisman (1994:69) describes the court case in which a judge ruled that a 17-year-old woman who was raped was “guilty of a great deal of contributory negligence” because it happened while she was hitchhiking late at night in 1982. Her rapist who had pleaded guilty? His punishment was a fine. Weisman’s book further analyses how public spaces are considered men’s spaces under patriarchy - an important notion to keep in mind whenever we’re speaking of women doing something in public. This is a form of gender policing. Such are the rules for narrative of a culture that strictly enforces the heterosexual matrix on its subjects.

3.2.3 Portrayals of Drivers Who Pick Up Hitchhikers

When an innocent driver picks up a hitchhiker, it must backfire somehow. Storytellers have made sure to reinforce the narrative of the danger a hitchhiker poses on the driver (Compagni Portis, 2015:55). It’s a danger that is optional - nobody expects drivers to stop for hitchhikers - and in plain sight. The dangers are therefore completely avoidable. Why take the risk?

The German research (Fiedler *et al.*, 1989:144-7. Translated) also had something to say about the true risks of picking up hitchhikers for drivers. The researchers warn that it’s hard to establish a reliable risk or danger of picking up hitchhikers, but found out some things through their interviews. Most what happened to drivers that fall under ‘bad experiences’ were inconveniences, like not thanking the driver for the ride, or slamming the door upon exiting the car. Without minor inconveniences, what is left is theft and getting a ‘bad feeling’ about a hitchhiker. The study only found very few people who had something stolen by a hitchhiker, and no driver had any violent encounter with a hitchhiker. Many drivers reported that they were afraid that if they got in an accident, the hitchhiker would sue them, or that they had to pay up more for their insurance. And the perception by male drivers that if they’d pick up a female hitchhiker, they’re afraid of being falsely accused of harassment, assault, or rape, or overstepping her boundaries in any way. The fear of being robbed was not mentioned a lot, because the driver usually has the feeling of having control over the car and feel more in power to get help.

If we’re talking about portrayals of drivers that are dangerous to hitchhikers, we get into the serial rapist/killer stereotype, mostly from television and film. Hitchhikers are portrayed as an

easy catch for a malicious person who drives (at night) to hunt for victims. This assumes that there are enough hitchhikers out there along miles and miles of road to find a victim, instead of the game of chance it is. If we're talking about spontaneous perpetrators (perpetrators of opportunity), then we can see how an individual can become bad given the chance to find an easy victim. This plays into the idea that, under the right circumstances, we can all be evil (Shaw, 2018). Pop culture portrayals of female drivers as perpetrators are unheard of - which doesn't mean that women can't make a hitchhiker feel uncomfortable.

3.2.4 The Enforcement of Narrative through Policy

One possible effect of certain popular narratives is that they become enshrined in the culture's law and enforced by the authorities. In the case of the USA and hitchhiking, this was done by a few incremental steps: the 'Stranger Danger' policy, outlawing pedestrians in certain places like on the highways, and then completely outlawing the practice in four states: Nevada, Idaho, Utah, and New Jersey - while some sources also mention New York, Wyoming, and Pennsylvania (Karsten, 2018; HitchWiki, 2018). Due to the nature of the activity, hitchhiking is notoriously hard to regulate. In spite of its status as illegal, hitchhikers have reported that it is rarely enforced through fines or arrest (HitchWiki, 2018). Notice that the uncertainty and unclarity of laws is also a way of discouraging people from hitchhiking.

The USA is the only country where I could confirm that the act of hitchhiking is completely outlawed in certain states. This doesn't mean that other countries don't have their own policies against it; outlawing pedestrians on highways is very common in other countries, too. For example: in almost the entire European Union this is the case (HitchWiki, 2018). In Italy, it's even outlawed to stand at gas stations attached to the highway (*autostrada*) without a vehicle (HitchWiki, 2018).

One other side effect of the narrative is that people might think that what you're doing is illegal, without having any particular knowledge of the law. This might lead civilians to call the police on hitchhikers. Or - more seriously so - it might lead unaware police officers to act outside of the law and fine or arrest a hitchhiker, based on a cultural assumption that *it must be* within the law. The latter situation can really lead the hitchhiker to be in a confusing situation, especially if the hitchhiker might be more aware of local law than law enforcement themselves⁵.

⁵ Just airing a personal grievance: this is part of my own lived experience. I had a run-in with the *Guardia Civil* in Catalunya, Spain.

Some other countries have ignored hitchhiking completely as a valid form of transportation. This has led policymakers, infrastructure planners, and city planners to come up with infrastructure design that is essentially hostile to hitchhikers. It is very important to note here that ignoring (the needs of) hitchhikers is also a policy choice.

3.2.5 Concluding Notes

No matter what, the message stays the same: don't hitchhike, don't pick up hitchhikers. If you do, you've made your bed. But this is actually a way of framing that crime involving hitchhikers is *expected*, and therefore appreciated by said culture; it confirms the bias needed to keep people from doing it. As Shaw (2018) put it succinctly: "bad culture lays the groundwork for bad behavior".

The only way to improve the imaging of hitchhikers in general and female hitchhikers in particular, is to tell more stories that do not buy into this perpetrator/victim binary. Considering that the spectrum of hitchhiking experiences usually spans from socially pleasant to kind of boring, we should expect the narratives to reflect that (Compagni Portis, 2015:50). A narrative so stubborn, both the news and pop culture are blurring the lines between fact and fiction.

3.3 The (New) Deafening Silence on Hitchhiking

What seems to be a (possibly new) development in the portrayal of hitchhiking in the news, pop culture, and policymaking, is an eerie silence on the topic. This applies mostly to North America, and Europe too. Besides the occasional news headline of a hitchhiker becoming a victim, the discourse on hitchhiking deadened. It's just not a topic of conversation.

While on the surface it may seem like an improvement on the discourse - at least nothing really negative is being said - silencing is actually the final step in the complete erasure of hitchhiking as a practice. Don't take me wrong, hitchhiking has been pronounced dead many times already (Schlebecker, 1958:326; Dalmas, 2013; Compagni Portis, 2015) or at least presumed to have died. Even when we're speaking of a hitchhiking 'revival' (Strand, 2012) the word implies that it's an imitation of the original. It's only when (young) people don't understand anymore what hitchhiking is, how it works, what symbols it uses, and why people do it, that the practice will really fall into oblivion.

4. Interviewed Hitchhikers: Insights Into the Practice

For this research, I've reached out to experienced hitchhikers who have solo-hitchhiking experience. This latter point is to ensure the quality of the data, since two individuals or more hitchhiking together would 1) mean that I'd have to interview all of them and 2) makes the data less generalizable. One interviewee had mostly hitchhiking-together experience, but everyone also did it alone. I tried to mostly ask about those experiences. As it was my first time doing such interviews, I've consulted with faculty staff and peers about my list of guiding questions and methodology before proceeding.

I've interviewed 5 individuals from various backgrounds. The youngest was 25 and the oldest 40. Together, the hitchhikers have hitchhiked in Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania. The interviews lasted between 45 and 107 minutes. They were conducted in person, via Skype, or via Zoom. As mentioned before, I mostly used the questions as a guideline to talk about the topic of danger perception, and felt flexible to let the interviewee talk about their experiences freely. The preliminary interview questions can be found in the Appendix of this paper.

The sample of hitchhikers is partly convenience, partly selected. I made a list of hitchhikers that I could come up with, and added more names by scrolling through my Facebook groups. I've been 'Facebook friends' with many of the potential candidates for years, even though I've met very few of them in person. Some hitchhikers weren't available for interviewing, due to remoteness of location. I tried to get a rather diverse group of people considering the small sample size, taking into account sexual orientation, race, nationality, and which countries they've hitchhiked in, besides (solo) hitchhiking experience. Trying to establish a broad dataset of the practice of hitchhiking and the hitchhikers themselves has always been an implicit goal of the interviews. Many of the interviewees also maintain an online presence in the form of blogs, vlogs, and Facebook group engagement. Many responded quite quickly to my messages sent to them via Facebook, and the responses were mostly affirmative to the suggestion of being interviewed.

Method-wise, I've approached the interviews as semi-structured, allowing for follow-up questions and side-tracking whenever it seemed beneficial (Edwards and Holland, 2013). I did all the interviews myself, and transcribed them myself as well. I chose this method and structure because it allows more depth of answer than a survey, and brings up related experiences. My

distance to the interviewees was practically nothing, as they all knew beforehand that I'm an experienced hitchhiker and their peer. The observational data implied that everyone felt very comfortable around me, even with the more uncomfortable questions. I always gave the interviewees the option to not answer delicate questions, though this option was [almost] never taken. I made sure to provide aftercare to the interviewees, by turning off the recorder and chatting with them about their experience doing the interview. Some described it as intense, and most commented on how they found the questions interesting. My own experience of the interviews was that it was really great to connect to so many hitchhikers, but also emotionally draining, especially during transcription, which was a cumbersome and lonesome process.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and organization of the gathered data was done by me in part during the transcription sessions - by highlighting certain quotes and coding (Saldana, 2009) them - and by comparing the interviews side-by-side when they were done and transcribed. The idea was always to excerpt and integrate direct quotes from the hitchhikers in this section to point out patterns of behavior by hitchhikers that eventually help answer my research question.

Before turning on the audio recording tool, I disclosed to the interviewees my methods of storing the mp3 files and processing them into transcripts. I informed the interviewees - to the best of my knowledge - how Maastricht University holds onto my thesis for posterity. Then I informed them that they'd need to consent to the recording of the audio first off, and then on the record. I assured them they would remain anonymous.

4.1 A Quick Poll Among Hitchhikers

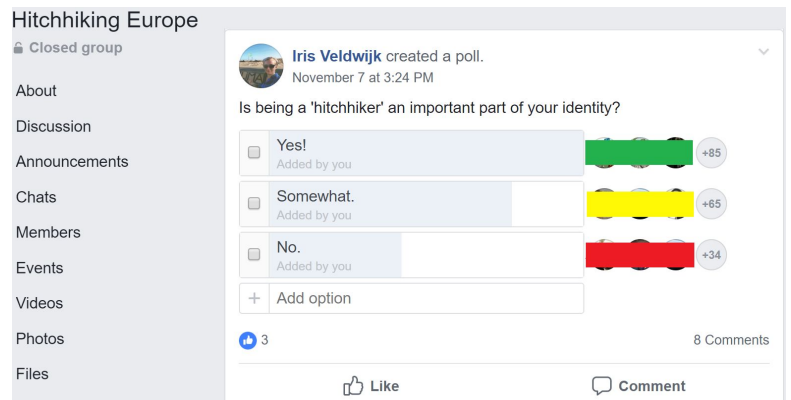
On 7 November 2018 - before doing the interviews - I performed a quick poll in a large Facebook group called 'Hitchhiking Europe' (25844 members). I asked members of the group "Is being a 'hitchhiker' an important part of your identity?" with the possible answers (1) "Yes!" (2) "Somewhat." and (3) "No."

This generated a response of (N = 193) people over 3 weeks, with 88 individuals voting (1), 68 individuals voting (2), and 37 individuals voting (3). See also Figure 1 below. I did not ask the individuals about the extensiveness of their (solo) hitchhiking experience - and some of them might have no experience hitchhiking at all. As it was done on Facebook, there was an option for people to elaborate on their vote in a comment. The post led 8 individuals to write a

comment; elaborating on their choice of answer, or tagging other members to draw attention to the question.

I used this poll to quickly get some quantitative data and satisfy one potential obstacle to the usefulness of doing interviews: what if hitchhiking is just something you do, and not something you are? What if hitchhikers

don't really care about being hitchhikers? The results told me that many hitchhikers are deeply involved in the practice and integrated it into their concept of the self. Even though the used method is not scientific enough, and the sampling quite unknown⁶ and cannot be of further use in this research, it was an essential step in my process. I didn't approach the poll voters for any of my qualitative interviews, though some of them may have voted in it as well.



4.2 The Interviewed Hitchhikers

The following headings help the reader discern the individual hitchhikers that I interviewed. Each heading contains some demographic data to provide some background information. I sorted the snippets by chronological order of conducting the interviews. I chose pseudonyms for all interviewees, with their approval. This hopefully helps the reader humanize the hitchhikers.

Even though I asked for each hitchhiker's worst experience last, I'll mention them with their respective biographies first, so that the reader can empathize with the hitchhikers early on. I'm also inviting the reader to think about hitchhiker's worst experiences before reading on. With this worst experience in mind, it also directly puts a perspective on the *imagined dangers* by non-hitchhikers and the *lived experiences* of hitchhikers. When reading the subsequent Thematic Analysis section, this will all make sense.

⁶ Anyone with a Facebook profile can potentially become a member of the group 'Hitchhiking Europe'. Of the 25844 members, many of them might have never hitchhiked before. Being a member doesn't tell much about the (solo) hitchhiking experience of the respondents.

Frank

Interviewed in person, Frank is a 40-year-old man from the Netherlands. He hitchhiked for the first time with his dad when he was 15. He became a regular hitchhiker years later. He keeps extremely detailed logs of his hitchhiking trips and he said the number of rides he has hitched is between 3300 and 3500. His experience lies mostly in mainland Europe, as Frank doesn't fly for environmental reasons. He is heterosexual and white, and has never been mistaken for a woman by a driver. I've met Frank before in person. The recorded interview lasted 1 hour and 21 minutes. He speaks Dutch, English, German, and French either fluently or on a good level and has some comprehension of Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Ukrainian, Czech and Slovak, and Luxembourgish. We conducted the interview in Dutch and all quotes of Frank's words are translations.

Though I didn't ask the question in the Appendix "Would you like to tell me the story of your worst hitchhiking experience?" to Frank, we did broach the topic of his worst experience of *this year so far* (November 2018). While hitchhiking from Germany to the Netherlands in the spring, Frank got into the truck with a driver who was going a very long distance to the Netherlands and then back to Germany. At that time, Frank was trying to beat his 24-hour distance record of hitchhiking, as he'd started that day all the way in Croatia. After one hour into the ride, the driver made it known to Frank that he was attracted to men, and started being annoying. It was too late for Frank to get out and abolish the plan to break his record, as this happened after they'd already passed the last highway exit to Maastricht that would make sense. So Frank decided to put up with the occasionally annoying driver and focus on beating his record. There were some nice sides to it, as they visited the beach in Holland before making the return trip. At some point during the very long ride, on the way back to Germany, Frank fell asleep in the truck. He woke up to the driver talking to him about his genital, and how he found that very interesting. The drivers words made Frank feel very bad and sexually intimidated. When they stopped, the driver started bothering Frank again, so Frank got out and slammed the door. It was a bad experience for him that he needed time to process for. The ride he got directly after this experience was once again very pleasant.

Felipe

Interviewed via Skype, Felipe is a 31-year-old hitchhiker from Brazil. He has been hitchhiking since he started studying in a different city in Brazil when he was 18. He took his first ride alone, and hitchhikes together only about 20% of the time in Brazil, and 10% or less in the rest of the world. Felipe doesn't keep track of his hitches in great detail, and couldn't give me an estimate of how many rides he's taken. He's gay and used to travel on a passport indicating an X⁷ for gender. Felipe is of mixed ethnic heritage, but passes as white most of the time. He has been mistaken a couple of times for a young woman by drivers, especially in his younger years. In his 13 years of hitchhiking, he's been to various countries in South America, Europe (East & West), and Southeast Asia. It was the first time I spoke with Felipe, but we've been Facebook friends for years and I've watched his vlogs. The interview lasted 1 hour and 28 minutes. He speaks Portuguese, English, and Spanish fluently, and some Danish. He's also had to pick up some basic Turkish and Bulgarian for hitchhiking purposes, but otherwise communicates with body language and mimicking. We conducted the interview in English.

When asking about Felipe's worst experience while hitchhiking, he first pointed out that "nothing really bad happened", like being robbed or raped. So while Felipe experienced a lot of things, he can't really say what was 'the worst' of them all. He sometimes felt a bit afraid of the drivers, like when the driver was high on drugs, driving too fast, and complaining about his life and family. Or when he got a bad feeling when the driver was very strange, and he couldn't really gauge what was going on in the driver's mind. When I pressed on about potentially dangerous situations, hoping to hear a story, Felipe told me about how he handles unwanted sexual advances. He sometimes sees the 'negotiating/insisting on sex' from drivers who don't hear his rejections as a part of culture; in some cultures, it's commonplace to have to reject something three times before the rejection is accepted. This acceptance was often followed by "awkward silence". Felipe therefore placed this experience in a 'cultural differences' context, and never got personally offended.

About traffic accidents, Felipe says that while hitchhiking, he's seen many near-accidents from the cars who stop too suddenly for him, saying jokingly "Yes, I've caused that". Then, the other drivers would honk, but mostly be angry at the car that made the sudden stop and not Felipe. In one or two cases, he experienced that drivers would make a 'prank' on

⁷ As opposed to the F/M binary, Brazilian citizens have the option to not disclose their gender on their passports and other legal documents.

him by driving in his direction and pretending to hit him, and then turning away from him again, just to scare him.

Felipe's curious personality becomes clear in the story he shared about hitchhiking from Barcelona to Paris with a female transgender friend from Brazil. Felipe decided to borrow some of her things and hitchhike as a transvestite. Spanish drivers sometimes started conjugating at Felipe in the feminine instead of the masculine, which was rather an "interesting" or "nice" experience. That same day, at night, Felipe and his friend were hitchhiking with a truck driver. When they made a stop, Felipe's friend wanted to offer sex work to other truck drivers at the stop. Their driver didn't take that so well since he wanted to have (unpaid) sex with her as a repayment for the ride. Eventually the driver told them to leave the truck, when Felipe talked to the driver. In his own words: "I made him change his mind, because he said he's a very nice person, and kind person, and I was like "Why then you can't give us a ride, just because she doesn't want to have sex with you?" and in the end he let her continue, until he changed his mind again and then he dropped us off in the gas station during the night time. Freezing cold." So while low temperatures can of course be dangerous, being at a gas station in the middle of the night is not per se dangerous as it happens to a lot of hitchhikers. The bigger issue here is that there was a disagreement between driver and hitchhikers, which led to social discomfort and a different drop-off point than initially agreed upon. Felipe described this event as a "social experiment" and very "atypical", as this is not something that happens much on a 'regular' hitchhiking day, adding laughingly " I don't even think it goes as an example for anything."

Stefanie

Interviewed via Zoom, Stefanie is a 25-year-old hitchhiker from Germany. She's been hitchhiking casually while traveling since she was 20. She took her first ride with a female friend. Over the last five years, she estimates her number of rides at 80, and covered about 10000 kilometers with this method. She has hitchhiked alone and together, but only with women. She hitchhiked in Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, Germany, and Taiwan. Stefanie is heterosexual, white, and has never been mistaken for a boy or man by drivers. I've never met Stefanie in person before the interview, but we've been Facebook friends and chatted a few times before. I've also watched her vlogs. The interview lasted 45 minutes. She speaks German, English,

French, and Turkish either fluently or on a high level, and is also familiar with Tagalog. We conducted the interview in English.

Stefanie's worst experience happened when hitchhiking from Bari to Napoli in Italy with a friend. It was their first big trip. They waited a long time, so they said they'd take the first car that would stop for them. Then a car with two guys stopped who said they were going to Napoli. They got in, but for one hour, they were just driving around Bari, stopping in various places and getting stuff from the houses. Getting tired and impatient because they had to arrive in Napoli that day, Stefanie and her friend asked when they would drive on. When finally on the highway, the guys were driving really fast, which scared Stefanie, so she asked them to slow down. They responded by making fun of her. Then the guy in the passenger's seat gave the driver a joint, which he smoked while driving. Then this guy covered the eyes of the driver, as a 'joke', so he couldn't see, and took over the steering wheel and "it was really so dangerous... Super dangerous." Stefanie then told the drivers that she wanted to leave the car, and spoke to them about how unsafe it is, until she said "I don't care, I just want to get out of the car", but they didn't stop. They just made more fun of it and were "driving like a maniac". She then started to cry, and her friend was also scared. When the guys saw that she was crying, they finally stopped the car on a highway parking stop. At that same time, a bus going to Napoli made a stop there. Stefanie and her friend were very relieved, so they directly went into the bus. Then one of the guys from the car followed them, and paid for their bus ticket. Stefanie thinks this was a nice gesture of them, but this was still her worst hitchhiking experience ever.

Emma

Interviewed via Skype, Emma is a 27-year-old hitchhiker from Germany. She's been hitchhiking consistently since age 20. She estimates the number of rides she's hitchhiked at ~7000, of which she hitchhiked 15% by herself. Emma has hitchhiked almost everywhere in Europe, quite a few countries in Central and West Asia, a bit in Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. She took her first ride alone from Berlin to Munich, after already having lots of experience with carsharing (German: *Mitfahrgelegenheiten*). The realization of "Wow, I get treated so much better and it's for free!" is what led her to continue hitchhiking. Emma is heterosexual, white, and has never been mistaken for a boy while hitchhiking. She speaks German and English fluently,

and knows some Danish, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Farsi, Turkish, and Indonesian through her travels. We conducted the interview in English.

Emma's worst experience was when she was hitchhiking in the Kurdish part of Turkey with a female friend. They'd just come from Iran and were hitchhiking at night. A truck stopped for them and the driver took them for a long distance. Emma's friend was drowsy, as she had taken painkillers after a dentist treatment, and occupied the seat on the trucker's bed. They found the area they were traveling through really sketchy, as they heard gunshots in the cold night and the road was riddled with burnt-out vehicles. The driver insisted that the hitchhikers joined him on his eating break, and even though Emma refused many times, eventually they went with. In hindsight, Emma says this was the first red flag. They drove through the night on mountain roads and the driver talked about how the area was really dangerous. Emma became really alert, and not per se because of the driver, but because of a fear of a random attack on their vehicle. The driver made a stop, and Emma let him know that she was still awake in the passenger seat.

A few hours later, the driver made another stop, and Emma pretended to be asleep. From the corners of her eyes, she watched him as he made a motion over her friend, as to lie on top of her. Her friend pushed him away, at which point both hitchhikers were fully alert. Her friend was afraid the driver was reaching for a gun, and the driver made the excuse that he was just reaching for something. They drove on, but the atmosphere had changed. He started laughing at them, and took photos of them on his phone without asking, and then he escalated things further by masturbating - while driving. Emma and her friend told him to stop, he took more photos of them, Emma took his phone out of his hand and the driver became really aggressive. Emma returned him his phone. They just wanted to get out at the next town, so when a town appeared, they urged him to stop. He said "No, I'll bring you to where I told you I would bring you", and when they saw it was only another 10 kilometers, they decided to stick with it.

When they drove into the agreed-upon town, he rejected several requests to be dropped off at various gas stations, saying he knew a better place. Then he stopped at some place, and the hitchhikers got ready to get out and grabbed their things from inside the cabin. Their backpacks were in the back (cargo) part of the truck, so they needed the driver to open this. On her way out of the truck, her friend accidentally kicked some of the interior with her shoe - a big no-no in the area - and this made the driver extremely irate. He refused to open the back of the truck for their backpacks, intending to steal them. At this point Emma told him from the ladder

one more time to give them their stuff, which he refused, so she pepper-sprayed him and got out of the truck. She and her friend tried to open the back of the truck, which didn't work due to its complexity. They tried to stop other traffic, but even though they slowed down, no one stopped, as they were shouting. Then the driver got out of the truck, at which point Emma thought "shit, now he's really gonna do something to us". He walked to the back of the truck, opened it, threw their backpacks out and then drove off.

Emma and her friend were really happy how they managed to get out together in the end *and* have their luggage. They had the license plate noted down and called the police who told them to write a report and actually found the driver. The police punched the driver a couple of times in front of them, and he confessed. But then the night police changed shift and the morning police came in, who knew nothing. The driver retracted his statements and denied the allegations. The new policemen also urged the women not to press charges, being threatened with charges against them if they didn't manage to show up at the appointment (weeks, possibly months later) - this was probably bullshit. Intimidated, they dropped the charges.

Natasha

Interviewed via Skype, Natasha is a 30-year-old hitchhiker who was born in Ukraine, but moved to Israel with her parents at a young age. She is a dual citizen of those countries, and can use both passports to travel. Her first hitchhiking experience was together with an Israeli travel friend in southern Chile. She was 23 years old then, so it's been 7 years. After that experience, she started hitchhiking by herself in South America, Israel, and 22 countries in Europe. She estimates that she hitchhikes solo 97% of the time. She identifies as female, and has never been mistaken for a man while hitchhiking. Her sexual orientation is demisexual. She's Jewish by birth, and has experienced some anti-semitism while traveling. She speaks English, Hebrew, Russian, Spanish, some Italian, and basic Dutch. She also further engaged with Arabic and many Slavic languages while traveling or in Israel. We conducted the interview in English.

When hitchhiking in Israel, Natasha got picked up by a man in a small truck. Only two minutes into the ride, the guy asked if Natasha had a boyfriend, and whether they were serious. She responded with a "yes" and then he asked if she had sex with her boyfriend, to which she also replied "yes". She realized that she didn't want to speak about this, and that the answer came wholly automatic, and she became really uncomfortable. Then he began to ask her

whether she'd ever had a one-night stand, and other personal questions about Natasha's sex life. She said she hadn't had a one-night stand, to which he responded "Oh, that's not possible, you probably *had* some one-night stands". He kept prodding her for answers about her sex life, and Natasha was very uncomfortable and shocked about the situation, as it was totally unexpected. It was only a short ride, and when he stopped Natasha got out and said to him "Don't ask hitchhikers these questions. We don't like that" and that was it.

Reflecting on this experience, Natasha told me she was very uncomfortable with the fact that she'd just spoken about her sex life with a stranger, and that he insisted on knowing it. She also felt guilty for not stopping it. Comparing it to other hitchhiking situations where drivers made unnecessary sexual advances, she says "I've had like some situations where the people actually asked me to have sex with them... but I somehow don't, I don't know - maybe because they were longer ago - but I don't consider them worse than this one, because... there I was somehow really surprised." She never felt threatened that he would rape, touch, or kidnap her - just disgust and extreme discomfort, and perhaps that he was *implying* sex without being clear about it.

Now I'd like to invite the reader to check in with themselves: did your expectations of the hitchhiker's worst experiences correspond to their answers? Did you expect worse?

4.3 Thematic Analysis

For the actual interview questions I used and developed over time, see Appendix.

4.3.1 Experienced Dangers

4.3.1.1 Their Worst Experiences, Analyzed

First of all, Natasha pointed out that her ‘worst’ experience is actually different from her ‘most dangerous’ experience. I theorized that the conflation between the two is likely a form of bias by non-hitchhikers: something that’s ‘bad’ when hitchhiking, must also be ‘dangerous’ at the same time. She said that this experience was the worst, because the driver both surprised her and made her feel very uncomfortable, but also because she personally felt ashamed about answering some of his question. Most of all, she didn’t know what was on the driver’s mind. She juxtaposed this experience to what she described as a “more dangerous situation”, when a driver was being sexually forward and ignored her negative answers. She knew then that the guy could not be trusted, staying alert wasn’t a problem, and she knew she had to get out and switch rides rather sooner than later: the ‘red flags’ were clear and present. Both experiences and how she interprets them are, of course, valid, but it’s important to point out that these are different topics. After all, my question was “Would you like to share your worst hitchhiking experience with me?” and not “Would you like to share your most dangerous hitchhiking experience with me?” Please keep this in mind.

What becomes clear from the worst experiences of the hitchhikers that many of them are related to dangerous driving. I’ll elaborate on this under the heading ‘Traffic-Related Dangers’ (4.3.1.3) later on. This conforms to the conclusions of the German research from the late 1980’s in the statistics section 1.3. Simply put: being part of traffic is just dangerous.

Of course, dangerous driving is not merely a lack of driving skill or being unattentive, as it is mostly combined with questionable behavior from the person(s) driving, as was the case with Stefanie and Felipe. Both dealt with drivers who were operating their vehicle under the influence of drugs. Stefanie’s detailed story illuminated how the guys’ dangerous driving behavior falls under forms of toxic masculinity: recklessness, the encouragement of violence, exerting dominance over women, dominating others, machismo, and substance abuse.

Especially when we read about how one of the guys (presumably the driver) ran up to Stefanie and her friend to pay for their bus ticket, as to somewhat apologize for their abominable behavior; he knew it was unacceptable, and tried to fix a situation that was already broken.

Another point to raise from these stories is that hitchhiking together (for women), didn't prevent these worst experiences from happening, at all. Female hitchhikers are often told that hitchhiking together with someone will increase their safety (Karsten, 2018), but in the cases of both Stefanie and Emma, this didn't stop the drivers from bad behavior. It's important to point out here that both Stefanie and Emma were hitchhiking together not just with anyone, but with *female* hitchhiking partners. During the interview, Emma also pointed at this experience: "When I was hitchhiking with my best friend, and we were two women hitchhiking, I expected... drivers [...] to not try to sexually harass us. Just because we were two people. [...] but actually it was absolutely the same, and it was like every second or every third driver asked us for sex, or tried something. And I was really surprised by this." Stefanie also said: "[...] I'm not afraid when there's a female driver."

This seems to indicate that the presence of a second *person* doesn't stop lousy behavior from male drivers, but perhaps that the presence second *male person* alongside a female hitchhiker *does* make a crucial difference. This might be an interesting area for further research on lived experiences by hitchhikers.

Coming to think of it, all the interviewed women's worst experiences were due to men not accepting the boundaries of the women - and often laughing at their request for decent behavior. Whether the fact that the *women* were *hitchhiking* instigated the men to behave unacceptably, or whether merely having *women present* brings them to act like this, will remain unknown.

Lastly, the men both had experiences with sexual propositioning from male drivers as well. While Felipe never really felt threatened by this, Frank did feel intimidated by his driver. What plays a role in Frank's story was also that he was sleeping, and woke up to insinuating speech. Frank's driver crossed the line of what's acceptable behavior multiple times that day.

Felipe deals with these experiences differently. Instead of feeling threatened, intimidated, or offended - which are all valid emotional responses, by the way - by the suggestion of sex with a male driver, Felipe either (a) interpreted it as a valid question, or (b)

placed it in a context of cultural differences. As Felipe is gay, the question of another man about having sex isn't so weird; it's something to think about, and then answer with yes or no. The times a driver insisted on sex, Felipe argued that in some cultures insisting multiple - usually three - times can be a form of civility - even if the suggestion itself may seem so incivil. So Felipe's sexual orientation inadvertently gives him a very sturdy emotional ground to deal with this kind of situation, while the suggestion of gay sex goes directly against Frank's heterosexual identity.

Now after this short analysis of only the *worst* experiences, I'll delve into other topics that came up during the interviews.

4.3.1.2 Social Danger and Social Violence

All interviewed hitchhikers reported that they don't find hitchhiking dangerous, some with more nuance than others. The answers depended on the angle of danger: social danger or direct physical danger. From the angle of social danger, 'stranger danger', or 'people trying to take advantage of you', the women tended to have more to say. Emma said that "there is danger involved" but like in so many other things in life, it's an unspecified danger, then she added that it's perhaps it's "a little bit more dangerous" than other social interactions. However, she later added that the most dangerous part of hitchhiking is "getting hit by a car... or getting into an accident", which I'll elaborate on later on.

From all interviews it emerged that there's nothing particularly dangerous to *the nature of hitchhiking* - by which I mean the very essence of it. Like in other parts of life, you don't get to decide when danger happens; danger is not something you can anticipate. However, because of the status of hitchhiking, many of the hitchhikers are (hyper)vigilant of their own safety. This, to them, is common sense. Emma reported that certain trigger phrases put her in a state from normally vigilant to hypervigilant of the situation. One of these phrases is actually the 'hitchhiking is dangerous' statement. She said "[...] in my experience, the drivers who ask me, if it isn't dangerous, or the drivers who tell me that it's dangerous... they're the ones I need to watch out for, [...] for me it's just not a good sign." Emma elaborated on other warning phrases: "[...] and also these are the ones that maybe ask me "Well how do you know I'm not a creep, or I don't want to do something?" and then that's usually the ones who have these kinds of thoughts. And some people act on it, and... yeah. The ones who like just don't address the topic, they've like, never made me troubles basically [laughs]." I should add here that she was specifically

talking about male drivers who said these things, adding: "I'm never afraid, or I'm never worried when I'm in the car with another women. Like... if it's a female driver, or... if it's a couple driving, like a woman and a man, something like that, or a family. Then I feel really safe."

One pattern found in the interviews was that all hitchhikers have dealt with male sexual aggression at one point or another. Most of the time, the male driver was the source of the sexual aggression. The definition of male sexual aggression here is the verbal and/or physical pursuit of sexual acts from a male subject to another subject. Common features are pressing for sex, negotiating for sex upon hearing 'no', and not respecting the other person's 'no' as a valid answer and intimidating them.

The women (Stefanie, Emma, Natasha) reported that this is a regular occurrence - *within* and *outside* of hitchhiking - and the men (Frank, Felipe) reported that it happens, but more rarely. Stefanie reported only to have experienced verbal sexual aggression while hitchhiking, but not physical, adding "but I'm afraid of sexual assaults from men". Emma said "I think all genders can also experience violence, by drivers. But I also think [...] that generally women, or, gender non-conforming people experience like a higher level of harassment and potentially violence". It's important not to minimize

The women are not really surprised by this kind of behavior, but it does add up to a constant vigilance or feelings of fear. To them, it's not a matter of *if* there will be verbal/physical male sexual aggression, but *when* it will happen next. While there are quite some differences in the quantity of male sexual aggression between men and women, it's important not to minimize men's experiences, because this only perpetuates harmful stereotypes of masculinity (Donnelly and Kenyon, 1996).

As discovered through Emma's experience, hitchhiking together with a male partner greatly reduces the risk of socially dangerous situations, but reduced risk is not the only benefit of hitchhiking in pairs. Other positive aspects of duo-hitchhiking (regardless of gender) are: shared social burden to talk to drivers, increased potential nap time (Felipe reported this as a big plus), someone to talk to during waiting, and sharing the burden of approaching people for rides. However, there are many downsides to traveling with a partner (again regardless of gender) as well, which are: longer waiting times, less personal connection to the drivers, decreased number of possible cars to hitch (capacity wise), mutual irritation, increased chances of miscommunication, overdependence, conflict over plans, and potentially a lesser feeling of

accomplishment upon arrival. These downsides tend to fall into the category of ‘inconveniences’ rather than ‘dangers’.

When hitchhiking together with a partner of the perceived ‘opposite sex’, hitchhikers often get the heterosexual matrix forced upon them through the assumption that they must be sexually involved with one another. On the contrary, when the female hitchhikers hitched together with another female hitchhiker, this was never the assumption, except in one rare case with Emma. She and her female friend were asked for sex by a driver, and she started laughing. His response in turn was to ask whether they were lesbians.

Hitchhiking at night was another point of contention. While all interviewed hitchhikers had done it at some point or another, none of them really prefer it; at night is never a good time to *start* hitchhiking, the speed of finding new rides slows down, and drivers are more suspect to pick up a hitchhiker. Alongside being a result of chance and not of choice, hitchhikers see nighttime hitchhiking as more dangerous because of the types of people, or more accurately: the types of behavior the night allows. This identification of the night as a time that’s more dangerous and makes individuals more vulnerable than daytime is cultural aspect that’s very pervasive across cultures (Levos and Zacchilli, 2015).

Especially the female hitchhikers reported more perceived risk of nighttime hitchhiking, emerging in the behavior of men. Whether the nighttime just has more perverts and creeps on the road or whether those same men show different behavior when the sun’s out is unknown. It may as well be that men feel like they can get away with more socially unacceptable behavior at night than in daytime. The statistically higher chances of encountering danger while hitchhiking at night conforms to the findings of the German study (Fiedler *et al.*, 1989:138-9).

Frank cited the exposure to “unknown people and opinions”, which he said isn’t per se dangerous, but interesting to him personally. It can happen that hitchhikers have very big political differences with their drivers, and there is a chance that either party shortens the ride, either in a respectful way (being dropped off at a good spot), or in a disrespectful way (being kicked out of the vehicle immediately). Felipe says he tends to engage with the different views of drivers, and that he sometimes feels a bit insecure about where it’s going, but that he doesn’t initiate talk on “sensitive subjects”.

It seems that being exposed to different opinions is generally a very welcomed aspect of hitchhiking, as something that broadens the mind, expands one’s ‘comfort zone’, and builds

character. Emma says: “[...] you get to see how people live, and you get to experience a country in a very different way.” Stefanie: “I think hitchhiking also helped me in developing skills, like, which I need for communication and meeting strangers [...]”.

Language barrier when hitchhiking internationally can also be a source of concern for personal safety, though it can also be a blessing. Emma says that hitchhiking helps her learn a language much easier, but also that a language barrier can get her more worried if there are other previously mentioned red flags at play: the presence of men and night-time. Felipe explained that his experience with language barriers mostly prevented him from accurately communicating what hitchhiking is. This also prevented the ‘hitchhiking is dangerous’ conversation from happening, in lieu for more ‘basic’ conversations like ‘what’s your name?’ and ‘where are you from?’. So instead, Felipe heard from other (English-speaking) travelers “you’re crazy for hitchhiking in Thailand!”

Stefanie’s experience with a language barrier in Taiwan was that it made people more curious about her, in a good way: “Even if they only speak Chinese and no English at all, they still pick you up”. When I asked her if she ever got confronted with negative opinions about her hitchhiking alone in Taiwan, she said: “not really, because, I really couldn’t talk a lot with them. Because they only speak Chinese, and... yeah, it was often really difficult to talk with them. So we didn’t talk about these kinds of things. Just “Hello, how are you?” and stuff like this.” This seems to suggest that a language barrier can increase the safety, because the social distance is bigger.

In all, the women seemed to have done more psychological preparation and evaluation for everything that happens in the car, and exhibit more situational awareness constantly. For example, when Emma gets something (innocent) offered in a car and refuses, but then gets offered again, she doesn’t change her mind. In her words, this is to show that “I know exactly what I want, and if I don’t want something, then they can’t convince me.”

4.3.1.3 Traffic-Related Dangers

The angle of traffic-related danger is the more agreed-upon danger among the hitchhikers. They all reported that they’ve been in physically dangerous situations, either by force (e.g. being dropped off on the highway), or by choice (e.g. when a not very safe spot is the only choice).

Felipe talked about how in South America there are no laws against being a pedestrian on the highways, and that these places are more dangerous to stop cars sometimes. He also said that even though he picked a good spot for the driver to safely stop from high speed, they would not see it and just hit the brakes in their lane, and then nearly cause an accident. Felipe also told me about that sometimes drivers make a 'joke', by intentionally driving towards where he's standing to scare him. This happens very rarely, but of course made him feel physically unsafe.

On the matter of car accidents, none of the hitchhikers had actually experienced this while hitchhiking (I didn't ask about car/traffic accidents outside of hitchhiking). Stefanie's worst experience - of drivers driving intentionally dangerous - while hitchhiking had her frightened for her life (and righteously so), but she and her friend got out physically unscathed, but emotionally devastated. This was a combination of psychological harm and physical threat due to the speed.

Dangerous driving is of course not specific to hitchhiking; you can travel by bus, train, or airplane and fear for your life that's in the hands of a driver or pilot. Since the hitchhiker is not in control of the vehicle, all they can do is ask the driver to slow down, or leave the vehicle at the first opportunity. Hitchhikers have therefore more control over the behavior of a driver than passengers in said bus, train, or airplane.

4.3.2 When do Hitchhikers get told it's Dangerous?

Three factors appeared from the interviews to be influential on when a driver would make a remark on danger in hitchhiking: gender, social distance, and age. Gender appeared to be quite an important factor; all the women reported being told that it's dangerous to hitchhike, and most of them got the message that it's particularly dangerous *for them as women*. While men don't get told as much that they shouldn't do it because it's dangerous, they do get told that it doesn't work for men, like in the case of Felipe. He points this out as an inconsistency in thinking, because this happens while in the car, meaning that obviously *it does work* for men, too.

The social distance factor comes down to how much the hitchhiker and the driver have in common. The more they have in common, or the more similar they are on certain aspects, the more it seems that the driver feels the lack of boundaries to judge the hitchhiker's life choices. Natasha told me about two experiences being judged very harshly by drivers when hitchhiking in her home country (and culture) Israel. In both cases, the drivers were also Jewish-Israeli, so they felt free enough to burden her with their opinions. She never experienced that an Arab

driver in Israel told her this. However, she did experience this as well once in Scotland, but since both Natasha and her drivers speak English fluently, they also felt that they could say their “What you’re doing is so dangerous” with her. Social distance can be therefore seen in a cultural context, but also more broadly in a mutual intelligibility context: it’s harder to convey judgment if your biggest obstacle is a language barrier.

The third factor, age, seemed to also play a role in how often a hitchhiker gets told it’s dangerous to hitchhike. Frank used to experience this judgement a lot more, but since he’s older now than when he started, people have stopped saying this as much. In many situations, the driver is older than the hitchhiker, but for Frank the time has come that he’s either older, an age-group peer, or just reached the age where people stop questioning your life’s choices. Paternalistic attitudes from driver to hitchhiker become less apparent, or at least less of a topic.

While these three factors appeared from my interviews, I’m not suggesting that this is an exhaustive list. There are also counter examples, mainly from Emma, who said that she’s experienced negative, judgmental, or paternalistic attitudes about her hitchhiking everywhere, without exception, even from cultures that are very distant to her own and with a high language barrier. Her experiences seem to be mostly rooted in the gender factor, though.

From the interviews it appeared that as the hitchhikers age, the concerns from outsiders become less. Whereas Stefanie is still dealing with a lot of resistance, Emma and Natasha seem to be a little past that stage, and Frank and Felipe don’t get any comments from family or friends anymore. Frank also specified that those who were opposed to his way of travel and living tended to not stay in contact, and therefore became filtered out of his life. Frank doesn’t experience the growing apart of former friends on the basis of whether they agree with him hitchhiking as a loss.

Reflecting on his earlier hitchhiking years, Frank says “[...] many chauffeurs think that it’s dangerous [...] even though it’s not based on anything. At least, they didn’t investigate it. But they say this - when you’re still younger - from a place of protectiveness, or a feeling of superiority. Like if you’re twenty years old... the average driver is forty years old, so he has more life experience, right [sarcasm]? So he goes on to tell you how things work. By now I’m forty, so yes, that doesn’t work anymore, so I’m finally allowed to tell my own story.”

An unwarranted level of protectiveness from strangers seems to be a recurring theme. Stefanie said: “I had drivers who were afraid of me as a hitchhiker, and also drivers that were afraid that I would get to the wrong people. So they took me. And they said “Yeah, I have a

daughter, and I saw my daughter in you. So... I just want you to be safe and get a lift with me, because I know I'll drive you safely." So... they told me they were afraid, and then they told me it's really dangerous and I shouldn't do it anymore. So I hear it a lot of times."

4.3.2.1 Common Contradictory Messages from Drivers

Many of the interviewed hitchhikers have become aware that some of the messages of discouragement from drivers either don't add up, is insufficiently evidenced, or are hypocritical.

Here is a list of common misconceptions that hitchhikers hear from drivers during the ride:

- 1) "Hitchhiking doesn't work (anymore)."

If it wouldn't work, then why am I in your car?

- 2) "You only get picked up by bad people."

Are you saying you're a bad person?

- 3) "It's incredibly inefficient."

Not only can it sometimes beat the speed of public transportation, but it's also the only option to get from A to B in some areas.

- 4) "Hitchhiking is very dangerous."

Based on what? Compared to what?

- 5) Gendered comments, like Emma hears "As a woman alone, you shouldn't do this" on a regular basis, and Felipe once was told "stay home if you're a man, don't go hitchhiking, because nobody's gonna pick you up."

Again, this is without any evidence.

Considering that when I asked Emma how often it happens to her that somebody says hitchhiking is dangerous, she said: "[...] if I hitchhike the whole day, it happens maybe once or twice a day. So... maybe like, ten percent of the rides." That is an incredible amount of discouragement to listen to.

Frank analyzes these situations, and disapproves of them as it discourages many young people from continuing. He says: "[...] because if you are constantly fighting against this, it's not fun. Especially if you're just starting out with hitchhiking, and you're having fun [...], but then you hear very often "It doesn't work" or "I wouldn't do it, it might go wrong", then you're constantly pushed into doubt. Or you have to refute it time and again - and you don't feel like doing that. And that demotivates - even though hitchhiking *does* work! - [...] and that's annoying."

(Translated)

4.3.2.2 Parental Protectiveness

Both Stefanie and Emma told me that they would often avoid talking about hitchhiking with their parents. Especially if it's about a trip in the near future, they would often not share their plans. Both women share their hitchhiking stories after the fact with their family, so they also know the (good) outcome of the hitchhiking trip.

One reason for avoiding the topic or telling a (white) lie about their hitchhiking trips, is that they're afraid to receive backlash and discouragement. Another popular reason for secrecy is an empathic one: no one wants their parents to worry about them while they're gone. Emma's parents have already tragically lost a child, so Emma knows that her safety is a sensitive subject. The two major factors at play here seem to be age and gender.

We didn't explore the ramifications of not sharing with one's parents aren't very deeply during the interviews. Although I can see a clear benefit safety-wise for a hitchhiker to inform their parents about their hitchhiking plans: someone who cares about you is in the know. Parental (over)protectiveness therefore seems to be an obstacle to individual hitchhiking safety.

4.3.2.3 Contact with the Authorities

One time, Emma was hitchhiking in Austria. Her driver asked her to give him oral sex, while driving on the highway. She said "no" and requested to get out of the vehicle, so they stopped in a curve on the highway. Through a snowstorm, she walked to the next emergency phone and called the police. They picked her up, and when she was in the car, she told them the story of what happened to her. One particular policeman questioned her story: "Are you sure you're not making this up? Are you sure you're telling the truth?" and she responded with: "Yeah, why do you think I would be standing here?" Still in disbelief, his retort was: "because if you're lying to us, then you could get into legal problems yourself." Perplexed, Emma said "No, I know exactly what happened, and I'm not lying to you", She had the license plate of the guy noted down as well.

At the police station, she gave a report. When they dropped her off at a gas station on the highway, that same police officer who didn't believe Emma, said "Sooner or later,

something will happen to you if you continue hitchhiking” and “it’s your choice, and I don’t want to tell you what to do, but sooner or later, you’ll end up in a situation where something bad will happen to you”.

This angered Emma profusely, as she told me very eloquently: “[...] because when I told them that something had happened, they didn't believe me, but then when I wanted to continue hitchhiking, they told me that something would happen to me. So it's just such a stupid double standard and it's like however I look at it, I'm always the one losing out. Like, either I'm not being believed, or people tell me I can't do a thing I want to do.”

What this story illustrates in my research are two things: (1) is that the authorities, can definitely buy into the cultural narrative that hitchhiking is dangerous, and contribute to the dangers by normalizing crime committed to hitchhikers, and (2) that when women report sexual harassment and sex crimes, women are systemically not believed by the authorities that handle these cases. The latter point is rooted in a pervasive false belief about how women aren't 'believable' or do false reporting (Fisher *et al.*, 2003; Du Mont *et al.*, 2003; Frohmann, 1991; Newman, 2017; Doyle, 2017). This leads to bigger consequences, like how only 1 out of 4 sexual assaults of women get reported to police, and how 15% of women doesn't believe the police would or could do anything to help (Fisher *et al.*, 2003; RAINN, 2018).

It's important to point out that this happened in a country with a high development, strong rule of law, protection of women's rights, etcetera, in which she might not be a citizen, but has the same mother tongue. Probably due to a lack of previously mentioned 'social distance', he also felt free enough to comment on her hitchhiking instead of choosing not to be judgmental.

4.3.3 Coping Mechanisms of Hitchhikers

4.3.3.1 Ignoring and Changing the Topic

The most common-mentioned method of dealing with negative attitudes from non-hitchhikers by hitchhikers is simply ignoring it. This seems in part rooted in the fact that they're all experienced hitchhikers, and their informed experience has taught them that ignoring is often more effective than engaging; engaging will often lead to a stalemate situation where one party agrees, the other disagrees, and further communication is inhibited due to a small (but fundamental) disagreement.

While it doesn't happen that often anymore to Frank, his attitude is "Look, I'll hitchhike anyway" (translated), and he ignores it. He did describe being told it's dangerous as "demotivating" to him when he got warnings more regularly. Frank says he never, ever engages anymore with this topic with his drivers. He adds: "I really don't like talking about that, because I think the risks are incredibly small, and people often drift off like "let's talk about that again."" Though it's not a solution, Frank seems very content with this method.

Felipe's told me a story about a man who also rambled on by himself: "The way he was speaking, he wasn't much open to listening. It was really a monologue, like he was saying his opinion and even if I tell him, "Oh I have hitchhiked a lot and I'm often doing it and I never had any big problem" but he would... especially in this case, the guy was not really showing that he wanted to listen, so I didn't really tell my experience, I just heard that, and left him with his opinion."

Stefanie's way of processing these comments is quite empathetic to the popular view that hitchhiking is dangerous, saying: "[...] yeah it's funny I think, because they're also part of the hitchhiking. And then they say "It's dangerous" like, yeah, I can understand it that.. they think like this, but. I don't know, most people are strange [laughs]." She processes these comments with a lot of nuance, but also detaches herself from them: "[...] I can't change their opinion [...]. So yeah, I don't take it personally."

Emma does take it more personally, saying: "My first reaction is to become really annoyed. And, then I usually try to brush it off, because I don't want to go into a deep discussion." and "I just try to change the topic."

Their identity as a hitchhiker can be seen as an interpretive horizons: those who haven't hitchhiked can't possibly understand.

4.3.3.2 Negotiating, Putting into Perspective, and Changing Perceptions

I asked the hitchhikers if they ever tried to change someone's mind about the dangers of hitchhiking. The answer is that through their experiences, they've developed a feeling whether people are open to hear it or not. The first sign that someone might be open to change their mind is formulation: do they say "hitchhiking is dangerous" as a statement, or ask "is hitchhiking dangerous?" as an open-ended question.

Emma reports she's much more open with female drivers, because she understands where they're coming from. She said: "If it's a woman then I have a lot more, like, patience and understanding for it, and I don't mind talking about it, or going into a discussion." The basis for this understanding is that Emma knows that society limits what women can and cannot do, which includes hitchhiking alone. "I think hitchhiking by myself is always also some form of activism. Because, a lot of people seem to think that yeah, it's dangerous for a woman. So I wanna show them that as a woman I can do it. And it's up to me to do it. Also sometimes I have conversations about this with my drivers. And I give them my perspective." In an attempt to change people's minds, Emma sometimes responds with: "That it shouldn't be for women to limit their freedoms, but it should be for men to change their attitudes", but then often got the retort of "You're too idealistic" from drivers and police alike.

Depending on the conversation, Natasha's response. Interestingly, she's sometimes more willing to enter a discussion if the driver is aggressively anti-hitchhiking. In her words: "[...] like once or twice in Israel, drivers were sort of mad at me. I felt like they were really thinking I was so stupid, and just trying to explain to me that I'm this little girl, and I have no idea how the world works - so that's the feeling I got. With them, I actually have this policy of like trying to play stupid. I say "What? Really? What dangers?" and then they're like "Yeah, there are criminals..." and I'm like "Oh, have you heard of any cases?" So I'm like trying to kind of... ask what they're talking about, as if I've never heard this before. And then, when people really get into a conversation with me, then I do try to explain like what I told you before, that it's not more dangerous [...] than anything else, and that even in unpleasant situations, we can get out of them, and that it has a lot of advantages."

All the interviewed hitchhikers put the 'dangers' of hitchhiking into perspective with other things that are actually more dangerous, but we never think about. Frank said with a hint of sarcasm: "No, hitchhiking isn't dangerous. Riding a bicycle is way more dangerous. Walking is way more dangerous, which is something I also enjoy doing. So I'm quite adventurous" (translated).

Often, the hitchhikers are familiar with certain statistics. The women often knew that most violence perpetuated to women comes from men they're familiar with, and not strange men, for example (Jewkes and Letherby, 2002:125). Some hitchhikers responded with answers based in rationality; they either answered with their own facts of experience or pointed towards the (little and old) data that is out there from before the turn of the century. The hitchhikers weren't sure whether mentioning statistics really helped them convince people it's not so dangerous. Natasha definitely thinks that sharing her hitchhiking stories might be more helpful, in her words: "I think if their mind really changed, it happened later, and I wasn't there to know about it. But I think with some drivers, when I explained the situation and I told them my experiences - and not only drivers, like, in general, people I met while traveling - maybe they realized it was possible, and it was not as dangerous. I think it's like, you know, they're sort of a distance between thinking it's completely dangerous, and then doing it yourself. So I think I maybe moved people on the scale."

None of the hitchhikers are actively proselytizing - "converting" people into hitchhikers. What happens more often is that the hitchhiker speaks to a non-hitchhiker (usually a peer in the sense of age or also being a traveler), and the non-hitchhiker asks the hitchhiker if they can try hitchhiking together. In this way, many have introduced others to it with success, like Frank, Felipe, Stefanie, and Natasha specifically said. After an altercation between her and a non-hitchhiker in an online space about hitchhiking, Natasha emphasized: "I think I've never told people just like on my own without them asking "go and hitchhiker" because I think it's like a very personal decision."

4.3.3.3 Minimization or Denial of Good Experiences

What happens to a lot of hitchhikers is that they share their positive experiences with a non-hitchhiker, but then get asked again about their bad experiences. Non-hitchhikers often want to hear about the negative experiences more than the positive ones, because those don't threaten their world-view. So while all hitchhikers have both good and bad stories, they get

disproportionately asked about the bad ones. This increases friction between the two groups, to the point that some would rather never discuss their bad experiences again. Only talking about the bad experiences has a couple of effects: (1) it forces the hitchhiker to relive that (often painful) story, (2) it turns the story into parody, or minstrelization⁸ and (3) it reinforces the status-quo, and legitimizes unacceptable behavior towards hitchhikers.

Another method to break hitchhikers is by minimizing their experiences. I'd like to refer back here to Emma's story with the Austrian police (4.3.2.3). Her dealing with sexual intimidation by a driver were exacerbated by the way the police officer mishandled his reaction. Instead of showing compassion and belief, he opted for disbelief and questioning her experience, and therefore minimizing her rightful claim to be treated with respect.

It's strange to pretend that hitchhikers are somehow less informed about hitchhiking than random non-hitchhikers, or 'authoritative' sources like the news, or someone who has lived in an area all their lives. It's literally telling hitchhikers they don't know enough about their own experiences to make informed decisions. These factors just widen the gap in communication between hitchhikers and non-hitchhikers, and discourages mutual understanding and effective dialogue.

4.4 Trusting the Data

Most of the data gathered from the interviews was rather consistent with the other interviews. The grand exception being that Felipe reports that being afraid of strangers is not something that children are taught. Instead, in Brazil it seems the opposite: it is culturally encouraged to talk to strangers. The negativity around hitchhiking (or more broadly: carpooling) seems to stem from fear of the lower classes, rather than a generalized fear of strangers.

The biggest gap in data consistency is the self-reported number of rides that the hitchhikers have taken. Those who don't gather the data of their rides had big troubles estimating how many rides they've actually hitched. The estimations then varied between "6000 rides over 7 years" (which would come down to more than 2 rides per day, every single day), and "80 rides over 10,000 kilometers in 5 years" (which would come down to every ride being 125 kilometers on average, which seems to be a lot⁹). In all cases, I've accepted the given answers as true during the interview (Northrup, 1996), but wondered about the gaps afterwards.

⁸ Sociologically speaking. See: <https://socratic.org/questions/what-is-minstrelization>

⁹ For comparison, Frank - who keeps detailed track of his data - never recorded an average distance per ride higher than 108 kilometers.

This led me to question my own experiences as a hitchhiker¹⁰. I think the real lesson is that it is extremely hard for hitchhikers to make an estimate if they don't keep data. However, as the number of rides hitchhiked is not central to this research, I don't consider this inconsistency a real threat to the validity of my research.

4.4.1 A Matter of Choice-Supportive Bias?

One possible criticism of the results coming from the interviewed hitchhikers might be something called 'choice-supportive bias'. Within psychology, this is a cognitive bias that makes a subject ascribe more positive attributes to the choice they've made, as opposed to the not-made choice (Nickerson, 1998). In the context of my research, this would mean that hitchhikers choose to not see hitchhiking as dangerous, because they already made the choice to hitchhike; they're looking in hindsight.

I argue that choice-supportive bias did not play a role with my interviewees; almost all of them made some experience that they chose public transportation over hitchhiking at some point, and then regretted or felt bad about that decision afterwards. Especially Felipe reported this when asked about this situation directly, and emphasized that hitchhiking simply does give him more satisfaction. I also emphasized the dangerous experiences they've made while hitchhiking and gained their trust to talk about those freely - something they might not be willing to do with a non-hitchhiking interviewer, as defense mechanisms might be stronger with an out-group interviewer.

¹⁰ My feeling is that I've hitchhiked more than 2000 rides in 6 years, but in reality, it must be between 1000 and 1400 rides as I've hitchhiked 80000 kilometers - the only 'known'. This is calculated with an estimated average of 65 kilometers distance per ride, based on Frank's realistic data.

5. Conclusion

In answer to my research question, hitchhikers have found a way to cope with the constant negative attention to their practice. They always seem to be ready to hear the common phrase “but it’s dangerous” or the curious question “but isn’t it dangerous?” when hitchhiking with drivers, or talking about hitchhiking with non-drivers and non-hitchhikers. Hitchhikers are very aware of the gap in thinking about hitchhiking between their in-group (hitchhikers) and the out-group (non-hitchhikers). They have to juggle their public identities as people, and their subjective identities as hitchhikers. In a sense, it seems that hitchhikers and non-hitchhikers are of a different mind when it comes to risk assessment.

The most popular way of coping with this is by ignoring this kind of talk, and swiftly changing the topic. While this method doesn’t help attitudes change, it’s often the most a hitchhiker can do, as it’s emotionally draining to end up in a deep discussion. Entering such discussions often only emphasizes the gap between the disparate worlds. The interviewees often said that they feel that they have little power to help someone change their mind, so they don’t bother. Many of them have accepted that hitchhikers and non-hitchhikers inhabit fundamentally different worlds, and that the sensitivity of the topic makes it hard for the discourse to not reach an impasse.

The second most common way of coping is by trying to negotiate someone’s position, or change their views. The hitchhikers had quite some experience listening to people, and often knew beforehand whether people would be open to hear their side of the story. Their experiences are a form of knowledge, and without being able to share this with non-hitchhikers, it will remain tacit knowledge. Sometimes, they had some success, but there is no way to see if the effect lasted. One method was to put the dangers of hitchhiking into perspective with other kinds of dangers we take for granted. Another method - when the non-hitchhiker is a driver - is to create a meaningful experience out of hitchhiking, for both parties.

Hitchhikers currently have little to no control over their narratives. Both depictions in pop culture and news story bias leads to a heavily skewed image over the actual dangers of hitchhiking. Human psychology exacerbates the perceived risks of hitchhiking in non-hitchhikers. Hitchhikers often feel frustrated that they have such little control over their stories, especially because they depend on the willingness to stop of those non-hitchhikers. Hitchhikers spend

tremendous amounts of time in the company of non-hitchhikers (like their drivers), and often have to engage in this negative narrative about hitchhiking to justify their mode of transportation. The amount of demotivational or discouraging in-vehicle conversation is highest in young and/or female hitchhikers. This type of conversation often turns a very pleasant ride into a mediocre or unpleasant one, possibly leaving both parties bitter in a situation that could have been very pleasant. In simpler words: hitchhiking is a lot more fun when hitchhikers are allowed to talk about the fun parts.

As shown through my interviews, hitchhikers often have quite a nuanced or even positive image of the world, humanity, and strangers, but such negative talk of “hitchhiking is dangerous” negates that feeling. Many also indicated that they were frustrated that many people only want to hear what bad experiences they’ve made, while there are not so many as compared to good experiences. Asking only for the bad experiences reproduces this flawed image of hitchhiking as a mode of transportation.

Current policies on hitchhiking are either ignoring it, dismissing it, or silencing it completely as a valid way of transportation, or amplifying that cultural fear around this mode of transportation. Even when policymakers have access to data indicating that it is rather safe, they keep operating from a space of fear instead of leading the public away from fear - in spite of the potential benefits of encouraging and facilitating hitchhiking. Removing hitchhiking spots, threatening with fines and arrest, and building pedestrian-hostile infrastructure might stop some potential hitchhikers, but not the experienced and passionate hitchhikers. These decisions just make hitchhiking physically less safe for hitchhikers and drivers alike, as there are less safe places to stop one’s car (even when someone just has car trouble).

The implication of this is that (1) hitchhiking brings a lot of positive things to society, and (2) its dangers lie in physical dangers of being close to the road. These two things are not what policymakers would like to hear, because the only conclusion for them to draw from this is that they’re not only capable, but also responsible for making hitchhiking safer; they could build better hitchhiking infrastructure that allows for greater mobility, and lower the differences between foot traffic and vehicle traffic. This knowledge is clearly undesirable for policymakers, because they’d have to rethink their entire approach to hitchhiking and acknowledge it as a form of transport. Despite its many benefits of embracing hitchhiking for the environment and social cohesion, hitchhikers don’t per se wish for policymakers to promote hitchhiking - they just want hitchhiking not to be condemned.

5.1 A Proposed Solution

I would loathe ending my bachelor's thesis on such a bleak outlook, so I'm proposing a few solutions to break through the silencing and the gridlock. Perhaps there is a way to let hitchhikers re-establish control over their narrative. For taking the helm at control over group narrative, there needs to be a group. One example of a successful rebranding of a social group is that of the LGBTQ+ community (Walters, 2003:29); they managed to make the queer community visible, known, understood, and (largely) accepted.

What could this look like for hitchhikers? First, hitchhikers could focus on certain aspects of hitchhiking that are desirable in current society. Basically, they need to 'change the conversation', and have people talk about a different aspect of hitchhiking than the tired story of its dangers. The topics I can come up with just now are (1) the decreased environmental impact and lesser traffic congestion, (2) better social cohesion or togetherness, and lesser loneliness, increased sharing (3) fighting against the 'filter bubble'. When talking about hitchhiking, it must be made clear that we're looking for a resurgence of hitchhiking, not a revival as if it's merely a trend.

If it sounds too rosy that hitchhikers can unite and become a political front, that's not my main worry; the most important thing is to build allies - similar to how the LGBTQ+ movement has its straight allies. This requires quite a bit of organization, but since hitchhikers have managed to organize grassroots Hitchgatherings (HitchWiki: 2018) for many years, the foundation is there. Especially for international hitchhiking, the European Commission's 'mobility and transport' group might be a good place to demand attention for hitchhiking as an environmentally friendly method of transportation - especially since they have almost nothing¹¹ about hitchhiking on their website.

I'm positive that hitchhikers can rebrand hitchhiking and themselves given the tools to take action. Thank you for reading my thesis.

¹¹ Again, the results for a search query on 'hitchhiking' mostly yields results as an appropriated term, like "dealing with hitchhikers and contaminants" when talking about invasive species.
https://ec.europa.eu/search/?QueryText=hitchhiking&op=Search&swlang=en&form_build_id=form-xG7EAWn43QB-qSvCztucyXHJWEOhcpH52XVDS-447Ek&form_id=nexteuropa_europa_search_search_form

Epilogue

... After the Ride.

The driver dropped the hitchhiker off at the gas station. The goodbye was polite and a little bit awkward. The driver took the chance to get a cup of coffee from the cafeteria at the gas station and have a little moment to themselves. Meanwhile, the hitchhiker walked around the gas station asking people filling up their tanks where they're headed. From behind the window of the warm and windless gas station, the driver observes cautiously.

The hitchhiker is now talking to a person, much alike the driver themselves. The same age, gender, race. Heck, even the car looks the same from their perspective. Does the new person look unreliable? No. But there is no certainty.

There is some nodding going on between the hitchhiker and the new driver; agreement has been reached. The new driver unlocks the passenger door and gestures a welcome to the hitchhiker. The whole scene plays out a lot more relaxedly and smoothly than the quick *hop in!* at the on-ramp just 30 minutes earlier. If only it was easier for cars to stop.

The hitchhiker gets in the car, puts their backpack on their lap, and waves goodbye in the direction of the cafeteria. Startled at the acknowledgment, the driver waves back from behind the glass. The hitchhiker drives off with the new driver, and the old driver knows everything will be OK.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Topics: hitchhiking, hitchhiking experiences, first rides and introduction to hitchhiking, danger, safety, conversations with drivers, drivers' perception, conflicting perceptions, cultural background, hitchhikers in the news, hitchhiking in popular culture, the interviewee's worst experience, demographic details. The order of these questions changed a bit during every interview.

Question List:

How many rides have you hitched in total?

- In which regions did you hitchhike?
- How many rides did you hitchhike alone?
- Where did you hitchhike alone?
- Can you tell me the story of your first ride? (alone/together - doesn't matter) When was this?

When did you first hear about hitchhiking?

- How old were you?
- Did your parents/friends have an opinion about it before you started yourself?

Would you say your culture has an opinion about hitchhiking?

- What is that opinion?

Do you think hitchhiking is dangerous?

- Can you describe some of the dangers of hitchhiking you perceive yourself?
- To whom are these things dangerous?
- How do you cope with them?
- Do you sometimes doubt hitchhiking?

- What kind of mechanisms have you developed over the years to prepare you for hitchhiking?
- What is your definition of 'dangerous'? Do you believe in objective danger?
- Do you believe in 'common sense'?
- Where do you think the perceived danger of hitchhiking stems from?
- What are things that make you fearful, or give you anxiety? (Could be anything)

How do you feel when you meet a stranger?

- In childhood, were you ever told to be suspicious/afraid of strangers?
- Do you think strangers are dangerous?

Have you ever been told by someone that what you're doing (hitchhiking) is dangerous?

- How does it feel when someone says that to you?
- Do you take this commentary seriously?
- What have your responses been when someone tried to discourage you from hitchhiking? Did you ever cave in?
- Has someone ever implied to you that the only reason you're still alive, is that you got 'lucky' while hitchhiking? How does that make you feel?
- Have you tried to change someone's views about hitchhiking? Did it work?
- Why do you think people say "hitchhiking is dangerous"?

Do your drivers tell you that what you're doing (hitchhiking) is dangerous?

- How do they express that?
- How do you respond?
- Does the topic change the atmosphere in the vehicle?
- Is there a difference to you, when a driver formulates it as a question ("But isn't it dangerous?") instead of a fact ("Hitchhiking is dangerous.")? Do you feel more or less inclined to like a driver based on how they broach the topic?
- Do you sometimes intentionally change the topic away from the dangers of hitchhiking, to keep the peace?
- Did a driver ever tell you "I picked you up, so that people with bad intentions wouldn't"? How do you respond to that?
- Do you think you have a positive impact on the lives of your drivers? If so, how?

- Do you trust your drivers?

Do your parents/family know you're hitchhiking?

- How does that make them feel?
- Do you ever get into arguments about your choice to hitchhike?
- Have you ever withheld the information that you were hitchhiking from your parents, to not make them worried?

Do you ever feel an adrenaline rush when you're hitchhiking?

- When do these occur during a hitchhiking day?
- How does it feel the night before you hitchhike?
- How does it feel when you're at your hitchhiking spot, and you haven't gotten your first ride yet?
- How does it feel when you caught your first ride?
- How does it feel in the middle of the hitchhiking day, and you're in a car?
- How does it feel when you're in your last ride, and you know you'll arrive?
- How does it feel when you've arrived and you close the car door behind you, and you're in an unknown environment?

Do you ever hitchhike together?

- Does the dynamic of hitchhiking change when you're hitchhiking with someone?
- How does your experience of hitchhiking change?
- Do you feel a bigger/the same/lesser sense of accomplishment when you've hitchhiked somewhere together than if you'd been alone?
- Who usually initiates hitchhiking together?
- Does the other person see you as an authoritative figure on hitchhiking? Do they follow your lead?
- What kind of role do you take on when you're hitchhiking together?
- What are the pros and cons of hitchhiking together?
- Do you ever experience feelings (negative/positive) while hitchhiking together, that you don't experience if you're hitchhiking alone?
- What kind of emotions?
- Do you prefer to hitchhike together, alone, or are you indifferent?

Have you ever had an encounter with law enforcement while hitchhiking?

- How did that interaction go?
- Did the law enforcers ever pass judgment on what you were doing?
- What kind of judgment was that?
- How did that make you feel?
- Do you trust law enforcement to provide you adequate help if something goes wrong while you were hitchhiking?

Do you read/watch/listen to the news?

- How often?
- Do you follow local news, news from your home area, or other kinds?
- Do you think that the news provides an accurate, objective representation of the truth of events?
- When a hitchhiker becomes a victim, and you read about it on the news, what do you feel?
- Do you think the reporting on victimized hitchhikers is neutral?
- Do you read the comment section? If so, what kind of opinions on hitchhiking and the individual victim do you encounter there?
- Does it affect you when another hitchhiker becomes victimized?
- Do you change your hitchhiking strategies based on such news?
- If something were to happen to you during hitchhiking, what would be your biggest fear for the aftermath?

Have you watched movies/read books in which there are hitchhikers?

- How are the hitchhikers portrayed? Are they protagonists?
- What kind of message do you receive from portrayals of hitchhikers in popular media?

Do you believe in a just world?

- Do you believe the world is progressing and becoming a better place to live?

Do you think there's a hitchhiker archetype?

- Do you fit in it?

- Do you feel a sense of community among hitchhikers?
- Do you feel like you have a lot in common with other hitchhikers?
- Would you like to

Why do you hitchhike?

- Is 'hitchhiker' a part of your identity?
- What does 'being a hitchhiker' mean to you?
- How has hitchhiking changed you?
- Do you see yourself hitchhiking in 10/20/40 years?

Would you like to share your worst hitchhiking experience with me?

- Which aspects made it so particularly bad?
- How does it feel to talk about this event?
- How has this experience changed your views on the potential dangers of hitchhiking?

Demographic questions:

- How old are you?
- What passport(s) do you have access to? Do you use them?
- Which languages do you speak?
- Which other languages have you also interacted with?
- What's your gender identity?
- What's your sexual orientation?
- What's your race/ethnicity? Do you sometimes pass for another race/ethnicity?
- Have you ever been mistaken for a person of the opposite gender? While hitchhiking?