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Hitchhiking: history, digitalisation and the future after the COVID-19 pandemic

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Autostop: historia, cyfryzacja i przyszłość po pandemii COVID-19

Streszczenie

Autostop ma długą historię jako forma turystyki alternatywnej. Doświadcza w ostatnich latach poważnych przemian w wyniku ogólnej cyfryzacji podróży i kultury. Podobnie jak inne formy mobilności, na podróże autostopem wpłynęła pandemia COVID-19 i niefarmaceutyczne regulacje mające na celu powstrzymanie rozprzestrzeniania się wirusa. W artykule w pierwszej kolejności zdefiniowano autostop jako zjawisko społeczne oraz przedstawiono jego historię z perspektywy globalnej i polskiej. Następnie omówiono obecny stan i możliwości rozwoju kultury autostopu. Dokonano w tym celu, po pierwsze, przeglądu prezentacji autostopu we współczesnej kulturze popularnej, zwłaszcza w kulturze internetowej, a po drugie, pogłębionych wywiadów z pięcioma młodymi, ale doświadczonymi autostopowiczami. Wywiady przeprowadzono w czasie obowiązywania restrykcji związanych z pandemią. Wywiady skupiają się na trzech głównych tematach: współczesnych wyzwaniach autostopu, wykorzystaniu ITC (technologii informacyjnych i komunikacyjnych)

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oraz podróżowaniu autostopem w czasie pandemii. Wyniki wskazują na ewolucję autostopu jako zjawiska społecznego, w którym dziedzictwo kulturowe alternatywnych stylów życia przeplata się z rosnącą rolą Internetu i komunikacji mobilnej. W podsumowaniu postulujemy dalsze badania, w tym zastosowanie nowych podejść metodologicznych i stawianie pytań badawczych dotyczących m.in. utowarowienia turystyki, znaczenia reputacji w Internecie oraz interakcji między autostopowiczami, mieszkańcami i kierowcami.

Słowa kluczowe: autostop, turystyka alternatywna, pandemia COVID 19, ICT (technologie informacyjne i komunikacyjne).

Abstract

Hitchhiking has a long history as a form of alternative tourism and has experienced significant transformations in recent years due to the overall digitalisation of travel and culture. Similarly to other forms of mobilities, it was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and non-pharmaceutical interventions aiming to stop the disease. The paper first defines hitchhiking as a social phenomenon and outlines its history from global and Polish perspectives. Then, it discusses the current developments and possible futures of hitchhiking culture. It is based first on the outline of the location of hitchhiking in contemporary popular culture, particularly Internet culture, and second on in-depth interviews with five young yet experienced lifestyle hitchhikers, performed during strict pandemic restrictions. The interviews focus on three major topics: modern challenges in hitchhiking, ITC (information and communication technologies) use, and hitchhiking during the pandemic. The results indicate the evolution of hitchhiking as a social phenomenon, where the cultural heritage of alternative lifestyles intertwines with the increasing role of the Internet and mobile communication. In conclusion, we postulate further studies, including applying new methodological approaches and asking research questions regarding, e.g. the commodification of tourism, the importance of web reputation, and interactions between hitchhikers, residents and drivers.

Keywords: hitchhiking, alternative tourism, COVID-19 pandemic, ICT (information and communication technologies).

Introduction

Hitchhiking as a means of transportation, a way of social contact, and a travelling lifestyle, has existed for a hundred years (Purkis, 2021; Schlebecker, 1958). Despite opinions on its decline in the last decades of the 20th century (Chesters & Smith, 2001; Garner, 2008), hitchhiking culture has survived and even revived around the world in recent decades (Kusiak, 2017; Mewes, 2016). Internet communication technologies provide a means to transfer hitchhiking know-how and communicate within the international travellers' community through social media, purpose-built platforms such as hitchwiki.org (Mewes, 2016) or travel blogs (Zhou, 2020). Moreover, new forms of collaborative mobility, somehow similar yet culturally distinctive from traditional hitchhiking, evolve with the growth of sharing economy (Shaheen & Cohen, 2013). Little is known, however, on how information and communication technologies (ICT) reshape the practices of hitchhiking against a historical backdrop.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2023 and non-pharmaceutical interventions employed to curb the spread of the disease have temporarily limited human mobility (Gössling *et al.*, 2021; Seyfi *et al.*, 2023) and will have a lasting impact on how people travel (Adamiak, 2023; Viana-Lora *et al.*, 2023). Its influence on hitchhiking has not been examined. We can expect the scope and attractiveness of this activity to decline for some time due to fear of contact with strangers by both travellers and drivers (Bresciani *et al.*, 2021; Shahabi *et al.*, 2021). For that reason, a decrease in the use of ridesharing services was observed during the pandemic (Tan *et al.*, 2022). However, the reactions to the pandemic differed within the tourist population depending on individual psychological and demographic characteristics, trip purpose and motivation (González-Reverté *et al.*, 2022; Zentveld *et al.*, 2022). Of various tourist groups, hitchhikers may particularly suit the description of crisis-resistant tourists as those “fitting the prototypical image of an adventure traveller, being more likely young, more extrovert, less agreeable, and willing to take high physical risks” (Hajibaba *et al.*, 2015, p. 57). Such an assumption yet requires empirical verification.

The paper aims to contribute to the scarce literature on the contemporary dynamics of the hitchhiking culture, by exploring the modern transformation in the practices of hitchhiking that are occurring under the influence of first, the spread of the use of Internet communication, media and services, and second, the specific situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve the aim, qualitative methodology and four sources of research material are used. The first one is the existing literary sources including books, research papers, grey literature such as conference reports and unpublished doctoral dissertations (Gokhale, 1997), and newspapers or magazines. The second source of information is media productions, including traditional media such as books, and movies, as well as new media (Listner *et al.*, 2009) such as blogs, video streaming platforms and social media. As for the third source, five experienced hitchhikers, mostly from Poland, were interviewed. The topics raised during the conversation referred to their general and pandemic experience in hitchhiking, the use of information and communication technologies while travelling, and opinions on the future of hitchhiking. Finally, we employed autoethnography as a personal experience narrative (Butz & Besio, 2009) of the first author, an experienced hitchhiker and an active participant in the hitchhikers’ community.

The paper is organised as follows. The next chapter defines hitchhiking as a social phenomenon and outlines its history from global and Polish perspectives. The third chapter outlines the representation of hitchhiking in traditional and new media. Further, after presenting the profiles of the interviewees and the first author, we analyse the content of interview responses and personal experiences organised around three core topics: modern challenges in hitchhik-

ing, the use of ICT in hitchhiking, and hitchhiking during the pandemic. In the end, conclusions are presented.

The definition and history of hitchhiking

Defining hitchhiking

Although there is a general agreement on the meaning of the term “hitchhiking” (or “autostop” with slight spelling variations in most European languages), the precise definition of this social practice remains a challenge. A simple technical definition can be found e.g. in the Polish online dictionary: “travelling in cars stopped along the way” (*Słownik Języka Polskiego PWN*, 2020). According to the Cambridge online dictionary to hitchhike means “to get free rides in people’s vehicles by standing next to the road and waiting for someone to pick you up” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Hitchwiki.org website, an important knowledge hub and communication platform for the international hitchhikers’ community defines this activity as “a form of transport where a traveller tries to catch a ride from another traveller, usually by car or truck, for free” (Hitchwiki, 2020).

Such purely technical definitions are often elaborated by focusing on the specifics of the relation between the driver and the hitchhiker. One of the popular Polish online dictionaries, *sjp.pl*, provides a relational definition of hitchhiking: “a form of travelling based on taking advantage of the kindness of accidentally encountered drivers” (*Słownik Języka Polskiego*, 2020) and another dictionary describes hitchhiking as a “courtesy lift by a car driver for a pedestrian traveller at the request signalled by him” (Kopaliński, 2000). In this understanding, the relation between a hitchhiker and a driver is a constituent element of this social phenomenon. The nature of this relation refers to the anthropology of gift economy (Mauss, 2002), where goods and services are given away freely under the assumption that receivers would pass the gift on, e.g. by lifting another hitchhiker in the future (Mewes, 2016). It is also understood that the driver’s gratification is the company and conversation with the traveller (Purkis, 2021).

Yet another approach to defining hitchhiking is to highlight personal motivations and meanings ascribed to this activity. Zhou (Zhou, 2020) describes hitchhiking as a form of lifestyle mobility and a means of self-expression. Here, this activity is closely related to forms of independent and budget travel often labelled as backpacking (Uriely et al., 2002). It can be traced back to Cohen’s (Cohen, 1972) non-institutionalised tourists, particularly drifters who “venture furthest away from the beaten track” (p. 168) and prefer the company of local people rather than other tourists. Therefore, hitchhiking is often treated not only as a means of transportation but also as a set of personal attitudes and travel be-

haviour, closely related to other forms of “slow”, “independent” or “niche” mobility including long-distance cycling, sailing and hiking (Random Roads, 2023.; O’Regan, 2012). Social and “budget” mobility extends to other elements of travel behaviour including accommodation, hence a particularly close association of hitchhiking with the use of the Couchsurfing platform and other social hospitality networks in recent decades (O’Regan, 2012; Karakan et al., 2021; Niezgodna & Kowalska, 2018).

History of hitchhiking in the world

Modern hitchhiking is usually historically associated with tramping and train hopping practised by vagabonds in the 19th and early 20th century USA (Schlebecker, 1958; Garner, 2008). The first media account of a hitchhiking trip may be a description of Charles Brown Jr’s 800-mile travel from Fort Wayne to New York, described in the *New York World Journal* (Purkis, 2021). In the 1920s the universal thumb signal was already used in America, and over the next decades, a specific hitchhikers’ lore was produced and expanded beyond the USA, first to Western Europe (McGuire, 2017; Mukerji, 1978). Until the middle of the 20th century, hitchhiking was widely practised as a means of transportation by students, soldiers, and job seekers in the USA, Europe and other parts of the world (Schlebecker, 1958).

At the end of the 1940s, the first signs of the numeric decline in hitchhiking were observed, first in the USA. It was caused on the one hand by growing car ownership, also among the young generation, and on the other hand by an increasing worry about the safety of this practice, fuelled by media accounts of crimes committed by, or to hitchhikers, and following anti-hitchhiking campaigns of automobile clubs and police, or even outlawing hitchhiking in some parts of the USA. In Europe, the popularisation of car ownership lagged behind North America, but similarly, together with the erosion of social trust and cultural transformation towards commodified leisure, economic individualism and “reaction against anyone perceived as a hippyish freeloader” (Poundland & Peston, 2009), it led to the drop in the popularity of hitchhiking in the 1970s and 1980s (Chesters & Smith, 2001). Still, parallel to the numeric decline, hitchhiking gained its own social, cultural and even political value associated with counter-cultural movements of beatniks and hippies associated with the ideas of peace, no violence, mutual help and opposition to mainstream consumerism (McGuire, 2017; O’Regan, 2012).

Nowadays, even though not mass-represented, the tradition of hitchhiking lives in Europe as a genre of alternative tourism and counter-cultural lifestyle mobility. There is a lively community organised around events and hitchhiking races (where participants hitchhike individually, yet simultaneously between

predefined places, and then participate in a social event at the final point) (Kusiak, 2017; Mewes, 2016; O'Regan, 2012). Since the beginning of the Internet era, numerous online communities uniting people internationally were established, such as web portals, blogs, social media groups and wiki pages (Chesters & Smith, 2001; Zhou, 2020), and these new opportunities for contact led to the renaissance of interest in and knowledge about this activity (Mewes, 2016). Hitchhiking, often described as an American invention that expanded to Western Europe (Schlebecker, 1958), has a long and rich history in the former Communist block of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Mewes, 2016; O'Regan, 2012), but also gains popularity outside of the Western World, e.g. in China (Zhou, 2020).

History of hitchhiking in Poland

The focus of the paper's empirical material on the cases of Polish hitchhikers makes it necessary to outline the historical context of thumb travel in Poland. This country is considered the first and only one where hitchhiking was once officially regulated and supported by the state (Czupryński, 2005; Garner, 2008; Keck-Szajbel, 2011). Later, this social practice experienced transformations similar to those happening in Western Europe but still exists as a form of niche tourism (Babiarz et al., 2019; Czupryński, 2005; Kusiak, 2017).

In the aftermath of World War II, communist governments saw the promotion of youth tourism as a promising way to legitimise the new borders of Poland: eastern parts of the pre-war territory had been joined to the Soviet Union, while former German territories in the west had been incorporated to Poland, and mass visits to these areas would help to genuinely "nationalise" them (Keck-Szajbel, 2011). Shortage of cars and public transportation equipment helped to accept the adaptation of a practice based on the principles of personal freedom and rooted in American tradition, so apparently non-compliant with the totalitarian regime in the Cold War era. Organised hitchhiking started in 1958, as a bottom-up initiative of the "Dookoła Świata" ("Around the World") youth travel magazine, supported by the Polish Tourist and Sightseeing Society (PTTK), which gained acceptance of police authorities. Participants in the action had to purchase a hitchhiker's booklet which served as an identity document, a proof of insurance and contained coupons for the drivers. Coupons were given to drivers, who, after collecting a certain amount, could participate in lotteries and win prizes such as washing machines or even a car. During the first 10 years of legal hitchhiking in Poland, about 400,000 travellers, including foreigners mostly from other Eastern Bloc countries, participated in the action (Żyliński, 2010). With time, hitchhiking booklets became less popular, and hitchhiking suffered a similar crisis as in Western European countries.

After the democratic transformation of the late 1980s, regulated hitchhiking was discontinued, yet hitchhiking is still being practised, as evidenced by the English version of the Hitchwiki.org portal, which describes Poland as “an awesome country for hitchhiking and even one of the most hitchhiker-friendly countries in whole Europe” (Hitchwiki, 2023). Authors stress the role of hitchhiking tradition in the current attitude towards this form of travelling, “Many drivers generally believe that others do not stop and that hitchhiking days are over in Poland [...]. From 1958 till the beginning of the ‘90s hitchhiking in Poland was an official way of travelling [...]. Thousands of people were hitchhiking through all these years – and most of them have cars today, so very often do they repay the debt” (Hitchwiki, 2023).

Opening the borders in the 1990s and later joining the European Union in 2004 and the Schengen zone in 2007, opened new destinations in Western and Southern Europe for young Polish travellers. The low purchasing power of Polish earnings and the discovery of the presence of hitchhiking culture in the West encouraged the use of this way of transportation to save money in travelling for leisure or for summer jobs abroad (Czupryński, 2005). On the other hand, destinations in the East, including the Balkan Peninsula and the former Soviet Union countries became the frontier for Polish budget and niche travellers (Horolets, 2013). A vivid community of hitchhikers emerged, consisting of students associations, and NGOs which organise several yearly hitchhiking races such as Międzynarodowe Mistrzostwa Autostopowe, Auto Stop Race, or Krakostop (Kusiak, 2017); travellers events (e.g. “Koloso” in Gdynia (Koloso, 2023)), and online websites, fora and blogs.

The representations of hitchhiking in traditional and new media

Despite being on the fringe of mainstream travel culture, hitchhiking was and is a common topic in media. There are world-famous American accounts of hitchhiking journeys in classic literature, e.g. Kerouac’s *On the Road* (Kerouac, 1957), more contemporary first-person narratives, such as Wald’s *Riding with Strangers* (Wald, 2006), or biographical books, such as Krakauer’s *Into the Wild* (Krakauer, 1996).

Cinema movies, particularly road thrillers such as 1953 *The Hitchhiker* and *The Hitcher* movie series (original movie from 1986, its 2003 sequel and 2007 remake), or media or fictional stories of hitchhikers being victims of crimes have played a role in shaping the negative image of hitchhikers and associating it with criminality (Chesters & Smith, 2001; Garner, 2008). Still, in modern cinema hitchhiking is presented more positively. According to a query of the IMDb website, between 1980 and 1999, there were 22 world-famous films including the topic

of hitchhiking, 7 of which portrayed it in a negative way (hitchhiker as a dangerous criminal or a victim of a crime), while 6 positively (positive presentation of a hitchhiker, e.g. in *Rambo: First Blood* from 1982). In the years 2000–2018 already 15 out of 27 films portrayed hitchhiking positively, either using it as a main topic (e.g. *Into the Wild* screen adaptation from 2007) or episodically (e.g. Superman in the *Man of Steel* from 2013). With time, hitchhiking is getting more present and more often the main topic of movies, which proves the renaissance of the interest in this practice.

The beginning of the 21st century marks the emergence of new forms of media enabled by Internet communication, including video blogs and short movies posted on streaming platforms, predominantly YouTube, which may attract thousands of viewers and in some demographic strata replace traditional media. The Polish Internet scene alone houses numerous thematic hitchhiking vloggers. The two most popular are Dawid “Faza” Fazowski’s authoring a YouTube “Przez Świat Na Fazie” channel (536 thousand subscribers in May 2023), where he posts videos from his hitchhiking trips around the world, originally from the perspective of a newcomer to this kind of adventure who set ambitious travel goals ahead of him. The second is Michał Pater with the channel “Hitchhiking To The End Of The World” (213 thousand subscribers in May 2023), presenting more detailed and knowledgeable reports of visited regions. This author also collects financial support for his trips from viewers via the crowdsourcing Internet platform Patronite.

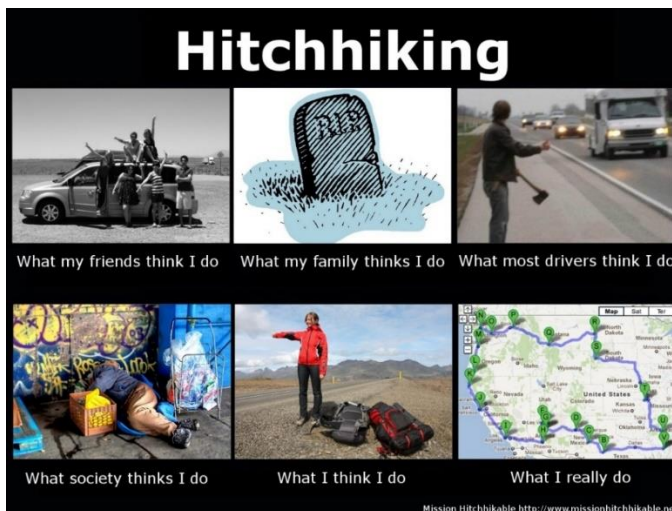
Hitchhiking has also marked its presence in the world of computer games. Even though they were usually niche or grotesque productions, they gained attention with the help of popular gaming streamers who play and test various computer games on their YouTube channels. There are, for example, two games drawing a stereotypical picture of hitchhiking as a risky or criminal activity. Both are beta-versions of games that did not make it to mass consumption. In the adventure game, *Rides With Strangers*, a player impersonates a young woman who travels to a different city by thumb, which leads to potentially dangerous encounters with drivers. In the second game, *The Road Trip*, the roles are reversed – it is the driver that the player impersonates, while hitchhikers are dangerous villains. Two more recent productions portray hitchhiking more positively. In *Hitchhiker: A Mystery Game*, a player becomes a hitchhiker suffering from amnesia, who needs to find answers about his identity and history by talking to drivers and other persons he meets while travelling. Another game, *Road 96*, is an adventure game where the main characters hitchhike to leave the fictitious totalitarian country. Similarly to other culture media, computer games implement two approaches to portray hitchhiking: fear and mockery typical for outsiders’ view, and adventure and complexity perceived by the insiders.

Another new form of media that emerged with the popularisation of the Internet and social media is Internet memes defined as “a form of visual enter-

tainment” represented by often simplistic images with additional text, referring to popular culture, video games, politics etc., and being subject to iterative re-mixes (Börzsei, 2013). Memes on hitchhiking often mock either the practice of hitchhiking, e.g. by associating thumb signal with the Internet like button (Fig. 1a), or the stereotypes around hitchhiking like the association between hitchhikers and psychopath murderers. A separate category of insider memes created by hitchhikers themselves and shared on their online mediums of communication aims to build and express the communal identity (Fig. 1b).



(a)



(b)

Figure 1

Internet memes related to hitchhiking: (a) a meme mocking hitchhikers using an ostensible misunderstanding: “That feel when some people by the road give likes to your car (<https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3026721>); (b) a meme used to express the communal identity of hitchhikers (<https://missionhitchhikable.wordpress.com/2012/03/03/what-do-hitchhikers-really-do/>)

Materials and methods of interview and autoethnographic research

In the empirical part of the paper, we use qualitative methodology. We employ interviews as well as the first author's autoethnography defined as a personal experience narrative (Butz & Besio, 2009). The interviews were conducted by telephone or Internet in May 2021. Five interviewees participating in the study were purpose-selected. Each of them has extensive hitchhiking experience, yet varied in length, and geographic scope. They are all young people in their 20s, four of them are Polish males, and one is a Chinese female. Interviewee A has mainly hitchhiked in Poland and the Baltic countries. Interviewee B is a university student, and he has hitchhiked extensively in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Western Asia. Interviewee C is educated in tourism, has travelled by thumb in all inhabited continents except South America and shares his experience on a popular Facebook profile. Interviewee D has hitchhiked in 27 countries to date, and his longest trip was undertaken at the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. He runs a popular Facebook profile and YouTube channel. The last interviewee (E) is the only female and non-Polish participant in the study, a Chinese long-term hitchhiking traveller in Europe.

To make the structure of the interviews clear to the reader, interview questions were divided into four categories. The first one referred to the respondents' experience in catching a ride and their basic beliefs about hitchhiking, such as its greatest advantages, or opinions on why drivers give rides. The second category concerned the respondents' opinions on the general changes in the hitchhiking culture and practice in recent years. The third category referred to the use of information and communication technologies by hitchhikers. The questions related, for example, to online applications used while travelling, or using social networks for sharing travel experiences. The last question category concerned the perception of the future of hitchhiking, in the context, among others, of the aforementioned role of the media in shaping popular opinion on hitchhiking, or the interviewees' position on the future of hitchhiking after the COVID-19 pandemic. Two interviewees have experience in hitchhiking during the pandemic and were therefore asked additional questions, regarding the details of hitchhiking in seemingly unfavourable circumstances.

The first author of the paper describes himself as a hitchhiker and has ten years of experience in travelling both in Poland and other European and Asian countries. During his hitchhiking journeys he visited 20 countries, including e.g. the Mediterranean countries, the Baltic states and the island of Taiwan. His opinions are thus based on his personal experience during his trips, as well as information obtained from other hitchhikers in the course of his hitchhiking career when he met many people sharing a similar passion for travel. During ten

years he had a chance to observe changes following the technological developments that significantly eased thumb travelling. His opinions will be therefore used to supplement the interviewees' opinions.

Results of interviews and autoethnography

Hitchhiking experience

The first topics covered in the interviews were the origins of interest in hitchhiking, motivations to choose this way of travelling and its major advantages compared to other forms of tourism. For all Polish interviewees, experiencing adventure and contact with other cultures seem to be the most important motives to hitchhike. Travelling by thumb provides a unique personal experience. The unexpectedness and uniqueness of each trip force hitchhikers to leave their comfort zone, learn to be resourceful and cope with new and challenging situations. Interviewee D claims that hitchhiking has changed his value system as he gained respect and reason.

This way of travelling allows them to explore the world, but also meet new people and cultures in their everyday environments — an experience hardly accessible to an institutionalised tourist. Attempts to communicate in the absence of a common language, or drivers' hospitality (some of them e.g. offer free "sightseeing tours" in the visited regions), encouraged them even more to continue their journey. As interviewee E recalls, such situations "restored her faith in humanity."

Down-to-earth motives also play a role: three interviewees mention the obvious financial advantage of such a way of travel. The costs required to visit other continents or very disconnected parts of the world by conventional means would be discouraging. Therefore, free hitchhiking allows tourists to visit regions that they would not normally be able to afford. Interviewee E mentioned the opportunity to travel around Europe at a low cost as the main reason to consider hitchhiking.

The path from the motives to starting a hitchhiking career varied in individual cases. Interviewees A and C were introduced to this activity by acquaintances who had already had experience in hitchhiking. Interviewee D, on the other hand, was inspired while studying at high school by one of the hitchhikers' YouTube channels. It is an example of how the online presence of hitchhiking culture mentioned in the earlier part of the work attracts new people to this way of travel.

At the time of the interviews, three respondents had already given up hitchhiking. For all of them, it was related to "entering an adult life", including new

professional and family obligations. Despite a desire to continue travelling, including hitchhiking, the need of constant taking care e.g. of their online business (interviewee C) does not match with the unpredictability of hitchhiking. This way of transportation is no more appealing when one needs to plan their free time in advance and in detail.

Trying to change the perspective, the respondents were also asked about their views on drivers' motivation to give a ride to hitchhikers. Most interviewees agree that there is no single motive. A large group of European drivers are those who used to hitchhike in the past and now, as interviewee B put it "they pay their debts". Some drivers are motivated by curiosity, the opportunity to meet and talk to a foreigner, willingness to experience an adventure, or pure admiration for the enthusiasm of hitchhikers. Interviewee D mentioned drivers who had wanted to try hitchhiking but had no courage to do it, and people looking for a companion to talk to, particularly on long journeys or at night. He also points at an "impulse" factor exemplified by the story of a 60-year-old businessman who admitted to giving a ride for the first time in his life, and explained his decision by an indescribable impulse he felt when seeing hitchhikers standing on the road with large backpacks. The respondents also mentioned drivers' pure helplessness and hospitality, or even pity, particularly when hitchhikers stand on a roadside in unfavourable weather conditions or in a dangerous area. Interviewee E's responses contrasted with the others, due to her status as a woman with a clearly foreign look. She mentioned sexual motives frequently expressed by male drivers (though she had not experienced sexual assault from their side), as well as particular hospitality and care offered to her due to her foreign look and language.

The interviewed hitchhikers point out multiple factors affecting drivers' willingness to give rides reflected by the waiting times ranging between zero (when a driver sees a hitchhiker getting out of another car and stops, aware of the hitchhiker's intentions) or a few seconds and several hours. Waiting time depends on the size of the travel company and its gender structure. Interviewee D started hitchhiking together with another male traveller he met on Facebook, but after 3-hour attempts to stop drivers together, they decided to split and then became more successful when catching rides. Since then, the interviewee travels alone. Interviewee E pointed out that hitchhiking as a single woman increases the chances of drivers stopping, which she easily noticed in the Balkan countries where she travelled the most. The interviewees also spoke about the importance of a location for catching a ride. Interviewee D mentioned Turkey as a "hitchhiking paradise" due to culturally rooted hospitality to strangers, while interviewee C considers Asian countries the easiest and North America the most difficult part of the world for hitchhiking. The respondents also noticed the importance of time of the year and day for hitchhiking efficiency: drivers are par-

ticularly eager to give rides in places and times unusual for an average tourist, e.g. during winter in typical summer tourist destinations. Interviewee D referred to his trip beyond the Arctic Circle, where, despite little traffic of vehicles, almost every driver stopped to pick him up due to the scarce population and low presence of tourists.

Hitchhiking transformations in the recent years

In the opinion of the first author of the work, the current socio-economic development of the world has vastly facilitated travelling and tourism, including hitchhiking. The number of member countries of the Schengen area, or those entering into agreements on visa-free travel, has been increasing over the recent decades, facilitating international mobility. For hitchhikers, it has particular importance, as their trips are usually spontaneous and hard to plan in a precise time frame, so visa regulations requiring advanced and detailed time scheduling may be a major obstacle. Another convenience is the availability of affordable travel insurance, e.g. linked to the Euro26 card, which gives every hitchhiker an increased sense of security. On the other hand, universal access to the Internet around the world allows for hassle-free verification and the use of insurance in almost any region of the world.

The growing interest in active tourism has significantly increased the demand for tourist equipment. Mass production has led to the reduction of prices. Such equipment has also become easily accessible in traditional shops, and chain stores such as Decathlon, as well as directly from producers e.g. via the AliExpress platform. Basic hitchhiker's equipment including a tourist backpack, a tent, a sleeping mat and a sleeping bag sufficing for years of travel could be bought for PLN 330 (EUR 73) in 2021. The possibility of ordering goods online and learning other users' opinions and suggestions on online forums further eases the purchase of reliable equipment at low cost. On the other hand, an increase in affordability and number of electronic devices (mobile phones, cameras, power banks) creates specific safety challenges: interviewee D prefers not to sleep in a tent, particularly in urbanised areas, for this reason, but would rather look for a Couchsurfing opportunity or even resort to commercial accommodation. Moreover, the increased affordability of commercial tourism services such as international flight or bus tickets may discourage long-distance hitchhiking.

One of the relatively new challenges for hitchhikers in Poland is the recent development of motorways and expressways, which started at the beginning of the 21st century (Koziarski, 2021). On the one hand, thanks to such modern roads, hitchhikers can cover distances of hundreds or even thousands of kilometres with a single vehicle. On the other hand, on such roads, cars can be stopped only at entrances or petrol stations, not at any point, as is the case on secondary

roads. Hitchhikers have to adapt to this, e.g. the use of a cardboard sign with the name of the destination written on it works great as a form of initial communication with the driver. Also planning the route when travelling on motorways and expressways requires higher awareness of the map and traffic conditions, as it is easy to get stuck at a place with low chances to stop any car. Thus, interviewee D prefers to carefully evaluate drivers' offers, not only considering the distance they can cover but also the quality of the endpoint in terms of the chances of further hitchhiking.

The use of the Internet and mobile applications in hitchhiking

The interviewees and the first author are convinced that one of the major changes in hitchhiking in recent years is the ease of access to mobile Internet, Internet applications and websites, while on the road. Aside from various technical improvements, the cost and easiness of accessing the Internet within the European Union were reduced with the abolishment of international roaming charges as of 2017. Before that regulation, travellers had to either buy a separate SIM card in each visited country, find Wi-Fi access points, ask local Internet users to share the connection via a mobile Wi-Fi hotspot or pay horrendous roaming charges for the use of home-country operator services. This limited not only the Internet use but also longer conversations with one's family. The same limitations still apply to the countries outside of the European Union. Here an online community of travellers may help: a website prepaid-data-sim-card.fandom.com provides information on GSM network offers from over 200 countries and regions of the world (Prepaid Data SIM Card Wiki, 2023).

Map applications are among those most useful when planning hitchhiking trips as well as while on the road. Apart from Google Maps, Maps.me is the application commonly mentioned by the interviewees. One key advantage of the latter one is often a more detailed and updated database derived from OpenStreetMap, which contains small paths not marked on Google Maps. Maps.me also enables downloading complete country maps in the device's memory, which is a crucial feature for hitchhikers, particularly in countries with a high price of Internet connection, as only the reach of a GPS signal is required to navigate. The replacement of traditional maps with their electronic counterparts may be one of the major transformations in the hitchhiking culture that happened in the digital era. Interviewee A admitted that he had never used a paper map in his life except in school or for fun. For Interviewee E, Maps.me is the single indispensable application without which she cannot imagine hitchhiking at all. Respondents also mentioned the applications facilitating the search for public transportation: Jakdojade.pl application displays current timetables of public transport means in many Polish cities, which is useful particularly for

hitchhikers trying to get out of a larger city centre to a site more convenient for catching a ride.

Another aspect of hitchhiking travel that mobile applications have facilitated is the communication between travellers and drivers. The presence of the language barrier can be very problematic, especially in distant countries. Nowadays, technology partially solves the problem. Interviewees C and D described the use of the Google Translate application to communicate in many foreign languages. After equipping their mobile phones with an Internet connection, they use the application to write sentences and translate them to interlocutors using voice synthesising. The translator can translate even long sentences and allows for quite easy basic communication with the driver. It replaces the previous technique of preparing a paper with a list of short useful sentences in the local language, e.g. where one is going or where they are from, to show to the drivers. Still, neither such a note nor Google Translate does allow for a full translation of complex and nuanced conversations. Thus, the aforesaid approach does not entirely eliminate the language barrier in getting to know local cultures, which takes away a lot of pleasure from travelling. For instance, interviewee B does not remember his trip to Russia well because, unlike his companion, he did not speak Russian and could not speak to the drivers, missing an essential part of the experience.

Among other applications and websites dedicated to all travellers, but useful for hitchhikers as well, are travel-oriented banking applications, e.g. Revolut, an online banking system that allows one to hold and exchange money at attractive rates across multiple currencies, pay by card and withdraw cash at ATMs in most countries around the world. Due to this flexibility of the offer and safety measures protecting one's money in the event of card loss or theft, it is popular among the interviewed hitchhikers.

The essence of hitchhiking is travelling for free, and hitchhikers often extend this principle to accommodation while on a trip, by staying in tents outside of commercial campsites. Yet, pitching a tent may be difficult, illegal or dangerous in urbanised areas. This is the reason for the high popularity of the Couchsurfing platform among hitchhikers, the interviewees included, giving them an opportunity to find free accommodation in many regions of the world offered by other users of the platform. The system allows travellers and people offering accommodation to set up profiles on which they can mark the countries they have visited, their interests and the languages they speak. A person looking for a place to sleep can send an accommodation request, as well as arrange other activities, such as sightseeing together. Hosting guests via Couchsurfing is not a commercial activity, hence it was possible even during the pandemic and the accompanying limitations on the operation of hotels and other accommodation businesses. Some respondents also mention the use of the Airbnb platform based

on a similar model of peer-to-peer accommodation, with a notable difference in the form of guests' payment to the host (Adamiak, 2021).

The interviewed hitchhikers were also asked about their use and opinion on the ridesharing platforms. The most popular one in Poland as well as in multiple other European countries is BlaBlaCar (BlaBlaCar, 2023). The mechanism is similar to hitchhiking as a traveller rides in a stranger's car. However, in BlaBlaCar, the passenger pays for the ride and their trip's time and route are previously agreed upon through the online platform. The service also provides more sense of security, as each participant needs to register on the platform using a telephone number, and a driver rating system is embedded in the platform. The interviewees' opinions on the relations between BlaBlaCar and hitchhiking are divided. For interviewee D, hitchhiking and ridesharing platforms have absolutely nothing in common, as spontaneity, essential for hitchhiking, is totally eliminated in case of BlaBlaCar. Interviewee A even states that the presence of such platforms reduces the number of people willing to hitchhike as it offers more comfort and convenience. Interviewee C, on the other hand, claims that using services such as BlaBlaCar may encourage people to hitchhike in the traditional way as it familiarises them with riding with strangers and shows that meeting new people can turn out to be a real adventure.

The Hitchwiki.org website, the previously mentioned collaborative encyclopedia of hitchhiking (Hitchwiki, 2023b), is an invaluable help in hitchhiking trips. The website is developed simultaneously in sixteen languages (including Polish), but its English version has the most extensive content. In addition to general information on how to start an adventure with hitchhiking, the encyclopedia describes the hitchhiking culture, important risks and dangers, and the basics of language communication in most countries of the world. Another important element is the database of world cities with detailed information on how to reach the exit roads from city centres, which addresses one of the greatest difficulties in hitchhiking, particularly in large agglomerations. The website also contains an online map with places suitable for catching a ride. The spots are described in detail by other hitchhikers, ranked on a 1 to 5 quality scale, as well as by the estimated average amount of time needed to get a lift. Changes in road conditions and further tips regarding hitchhiking in a given spot are updated by other users' comments.

Last but not least, hitchhikers use social media while planning the trip, travelling, and after coming back home. On the most popular social networking site, Facebook, there are many groups connecting hitchhikers. The largest Polish-speaking group of this kind, "Autostopowiczeczyli MY :)" was established in 2010 and currently has over 54 thousand members. The group administrators have created a system of tags enabling the participants to easily find announcements and advice of their interest. For example, the "emergency" tag indicates that

a person needs quick help, often asking for accommodation in some city, the “integration” tag contains proposals to meet with other members of the group, the “tips” tag indicates looking for advice on various topics, while “looking for a companion” announcements help to find company for a planned hitchhiking trip.

Social media are also used to share travel experiences, often not only with close friends but a wide audience of followers. Again, the attitudes and behaviour in this regard differ within the group of interviewees. Most of them do share their experiences while on the trip and afterwards, predominantly on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, receiving varied interest. Only interviewee A stated that he does not run any profile of the described nature, however, he mentions that he shared photos from the trip on his private Facebook profile.

The global availability of the Internet and smartphones has made it much easier to hitchhike today than it used to be in the past. Maps, once required for long-distance travel, have been replaced with map applications. Internet sources such as Hitchwiki.org make it easier to find a good spot for catching a ride, which used to be particularly difficult in big cities. Forums, websites and social media provide answers to most of the questions that bother particularly inexperienced hitchhikers. Internet communication thus helps to save money, space in luggage and time when catching a ride. Yet, the advent of sharing economy platforms such as ridesharing applications both enriches and challenges the tradition of hitchhiking.

Hitchhiking in the COVID-19 pandemic

The global pandemic has changed the conditions for mobility and tourism, including hitchhiking. Border closures hindered international travelling in many countries for months. Also, frequently changing regulations and situations at the borders of countries and within them could deter hitchhikers, particularly inexperienced ones from trying out hitchhiking for the first time. A more subtle obstacle was a change in drivers’ attitudes, i.e. more wariness of strangers, including foreigners. For example, Taiwanese drivers often stopped to help due to culturally rooted politeness, but then interviewed a given hitchhiker about their origin, length of stay on the island, or purpose of arrival, before letting them enter the vehicle. Some drivers even asked to see the hitchhiker’s documents, such as their ID card, passport or resident permit, to avoid possible problems in the event of a police inspection. Such increased caution further augments the problem of the language barrier, which can however be overcome, for example, by using the previously described Google Translate, a note with useful phrases, or learning appropriate sentences in the language of the visited country. Another pandemic-induced change in hitchhiking behaviour noticed by interviewee E was the need to wear a facemask, not only because of drivers’ requests

but also because of some countries' sanitary regulations, which required it even when travelling by car.

The pandemic situation has also had positive consequences for some hitchhikers' travel experience. Interviewee D mentioned that in his opinion catching a bargain has never been easier. He has noticed that the time needed to get a lift has significantly shortened. Considerably reduced tourist traffic, particularly outside Europe, made him be treated as a "VIP Tourist" by local drivers and inhabitants. Most of the people he met were willing to help him precisely because of their interest in long-not-seen tourists with backpacks. Also, in some Asian countries with strict border crossing restrictions and low infection rates in the first year of the pandemic, after entering such a country and fulfilling mandatory quarantine, staying and travelling within its borders was not problematic for a foreigner. The respondents also noticed increased media attention given to travel, hitchhiking included, during the pandemic. Interviewee A speculated that people who missed travelling and tourism were more interested in cultural products related to travel, which positively influenced the image of travel in the eyes of society. Interviewees B and C suppose that these media may inspire new hitchhikers.

Therefore, hitchhiking at the time of the pandemic was possible but associated with a change of convention. Searching for a travel destination convenient due to not so demanding restrictions required a potential hitchhiker to spend much more time, patience and money. Interviewee D claims that crossing international borders was indeed difficult, but it could be valued as an additional source of adrenaline. Possible loopholes in regulations that could be used by hitchhikers included the possibility of travelling with truck drivers who, in many cases, were not subject to strict control. It means that even in the face of the global pandemic, hitchhiking, due to its basic assumptions and intrinsic flexibility, could be adapted to the circumstances and still practised.

Since the time the interviews were held, the situation has returned largely to normal due to widespread vaccination, population immunity, introduction of the vaccination certificates and lifting most travel restrictions related to the pandemic. Most interviewees agree that once most restrictions were lifted, hitchhiking would return to its pre-pandemic form, yet, not immediately. As interviewee C predicts, trust in strangers will take months or even years to rebuild. So hitchhiking, which in a way depends on the mutual trust of at least two people, may also have to wait for its revival. At least, interviewee E predicts that from now on drivers will be much more careful about who they stop for. Interviewee A doubts that the number of both travellers and drivers giving them a lift will return to the pre-pandemic state.

Conclusions

Hitchhiking has a long history as a means of transportation, a way of social interaction, and a type of alternative tourism. However, it has been experiencing transformations in recent years as a result of social trends including the digitalisation of travel and culture. Similarly to other forms of mobility, it was also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and non-pharmaceutical interventions aiming to stop the disease. The paper aimed to discuss the current developments and possible futures of hitchhiking culture based on media sources including the new media, as well as autoethnographic accounts and in-depth interviews with experienced hitchhikers, performed during the pandemic.

There is a popular opinion that the recent decades have seen a decline in hitchhiking culture due to increased car ownership and cheap long-distance public transportation, individualism and increased fear associated with this way of travelling, which is fuelled by media reports on the dangers of such an activity. Contrary to this trend, fewer formalities needed to travel internationally, at least in Europe, growing affordability of equipment and opening borders acted in favour of this way of transportation. What is more, latest cultural products such as popular movies tend to present hitchhiking positively, and new media venues, such as video streaming platforms are used by travel creators to popularise various types of niche activities, hitchhiking included. Social media play a major role in the globalisation culture, where hitchhiking is no exception as, in its Western form originating from Europe and North America, it is being adopted in other parts of the world not only by Western backpackers but also travellers originating from other cultural regions (Zhou, 2020).

The current technological development facilitates almost every aspect of life, travelling included. It is not different with hitchhiking, which is easier than ever thanks to access to websites, social media, and mobile applications. Technology helps in orientation, communication with drivers, finding suitable places to stop cars, looking for free or cheap accommodation, exchanging currencies, and using common experience and advice from a global community of hitchhikers and backpackers. In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, easy access to ever-changing information concerning e.g. entry regulations, gained a new importance. Most subjects of the research have witnessed the popularisation of access to mobile Internet. Lack of access to such technologies would be particularly problematic for people who are just starting their adventure with hitchhiking. Experienced hitchhikers, however, could decide to travel without electronic devices, treating it as a form of challenge, recreating the traditional way of travelling from years before.

The history and development of hitchhiking is a good example of how constant cultivation and adaptation of tradition to new realities can keep it alive. It

has become rooted in international culture, and will not cease to be cultivated and forgotten. In the development of today's hitchhiking culture, the community of websites and social media plays a major role, helping experienced travellers in their journeys, and also supporting the introduction of new people to the practice. It is thanks to such organised activities that hitchhiking has a *raison d'être* in the future.

Keeping in mind that the culture of hitchhiking will persist, there remain open questions regarding the direction of its evolution. This offers possible new research areas for the future. They include the application of new methodical approaches, e.g. quantitative studies, which are needed to evaluate the scope and generalise conclusions on the entire population but have been scarce to date due to the inherently unorganised nature of hitchhiking tourism. They may become possible now with the use of web-based big data and surveys, aside from already applied qualitative ethnographic methods. New research questions, in turn, refer to the future transformations of hitchhiking tourism caused not only by the ever-changing international political situation but also by the commodification of tourism, the impact of web reputation on travel behaviour transforming interactions with local populations, drivers and other participants of hitchhiking tourism.

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