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Hitchhiking tourism and social trust: exploring Chinese experiences through travel blogs

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Introduction

Tourism activities often rely on acts of kindness among strangers in institutionalized commercial or non-institutionalized situations (Filep, Macnaughton, & Glover, 2017; Glover & Filep, 2015). But the role played by receiving and providing kindness in tourism and its social significance lacks profound analysis. As a mode of alternative slow mobility, hitchhiking, which includes many transient social interactions, is practiced to experience existential authenticity in tourism (O'Regan, 2013). Hitchhiking tourism also provides a unique context for examining the transient social interactions among strangers due to the novelty and strangeness of the roadscape in which the tourists immerse themselves and the temporary nature of the social interactions they rely upon to complete the ride. Tourism serves as a social platform through which strangers interact, and tourists regularly benefit from the kindness of strangers through transient social interactions. These seemingly transient interactions essentially compose tourist experiences and may induce profound effects on the tourists and the host communities over the long run.

Hitchhiking, or thumb traveling, is a form of self-expression and emancipation that reflects personal and national identities (Mahood, 2016). The sharing economy, the development of information technology and the need for sustainable transport have led to co-created platforms such as Uber, and ride-sharing has become a common and expected act in modern society (Shaheen & Cohen, 2013). However, the act of ride-sharing existed long before the building of such institutionalized platforms. As a tourism activity, hitchhiking remains an act of art without institutionalized control. This article explores hitchhiking to reveal this style of non-institutionalized mobility that is perceived and experienced by tourists. In particular, this article focuses on the practice of hitchhiking by Chinese tourists, which has appeared only in recent years and is different from many other contexts in which hitchhiking has wider acceptance.

Hitchhiking was originally a necessity-driven mode of transportation that boomed during the 1960s and 1970s with the youth counterculture and the rejection of the middle-class lifestyle in the US (Reid, 2010). Hitchhiking also increased in many European countries, mostly among youth and students as a low-budget way to travel to demonstrations and music festivals (Hampton, 2013). In the West, hitchhiking has symbolized the search for individual and collective enlightenment, and labels such as dangerous, rebellious, and hippie have been attached to hitchhikers (Miller, 1973). From the last century to contemporary times, hitchhiking has remained an alternative form of transportation. The practice of hitchhiking is associated with the idea of an identity crisis and with highly developed road systems and automobiles. It is viewed as more than a means to reach a destination; it is also considered a way to use and re-humanize the road-scape and a liminal space for soul-searching (Laviolette, 2016; Miller, 1973). Hitchhiking activities in Western countries faced a decline in the 1980s due to the increasingly widespread availability of automobiles among youth while, in

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recent years, the discussion about the shared use of automobiles and environmental concerns has spurred another hitchhiking wave (O'Regan, 2013; Reid, 2010). Studies in psychology have examined the moderating factors of hitchhiking success using field experiment approaches (Guéguen & Lamy, 2013). A recent study conducted a meta-analysis and calculated the base rate of hitchhiking success, finding that female hitchhikers have a higher success rate than male (Kotz, 2017).

In the context of tourism, hitchhiking is perceived as an alternative tourism activity of non-institutionalized backpackers, alongside couch surfing, cycling, and begging. Although numerous studies have examined backpackers' experiences (O'Reilly, 2006; Richards & Wilson, 2004; Uriely, Yonay, & Simchai, 2002), only a few studies focus specifically on hitchhiking in tourism (Garner, 2008; O'Regan, 2013). While Chinese tourists have attracted a great deal of attention in the recent tourism literature, few studies examine Chinese backpackers as an important market segment for both domestic and international tourism (Chan, 2006; Chen, Bao, & Huang, 2014; Ong & du Cros, 2012). Hitchhiking is a relatively new phenomenon in China; in fact, a real-life hitchhiking documentary released in 2009 called "To Berlin by Thumb" successfully brought attention on this alternative tourism activity. This documentary told the story of two men hitchhiking from Beijing to Berlin. Backpackers were inspired to follow suit, and awareness of hitchhiking has increased ever since. Although traditional Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism, Chinese tourists are becoming increasingly individualistic (Hsu & Huang, 2016). The practice of hitchhiking apparently coincides with a shift in cultural values and tourism aspirations.

In mainstream and institutionalized tourism activities, economic and financial transactions and commercial interactions are regulated by legalistic contracts, and relationships are bounded by transaction costs. In hitchhiking tourism, the exchange is often non-institutionalized: hitchhikers ask for a ride as a favour and rely on the kindness of the driver to complete a successful hitch. Therefore, in the hitchhiking process, social trust and social interaction are important components. The Chinese society is known as operated on *Guanxi* relationships and thus low on societal social trust (Fukuyama, 1995; Zhai, 2009). Originating from Confucian thought, *Guanxi* represents a system of social connections in a society in which kinship associations are of particular importance. While in hitchhiking tourism, social interactions happen among strangers with no previous associations, the traditional reliance on *Guanxi* is challenged and social trust becomes foundations of such interactions. The purpose of this study is to identify the experiences of hitchhiking in tourism and the role of transient social interactions in these experiences through online travel blogs. The main objectives are to examine the motivations and experiences of Chinese tourists who choose to hitchhike and to identify the characteristics and roles of transient social interactions in their experiences. The following sections of this research review the existing studies on hitchhiking tourism and social interactions in the tourism literature, followed by an explanation of the research methods and findings on the motivations, processes and experiences of hitchhiking tourism and the presence and roles of transient social interactions. Last, a discussion is presented, and conclusions are drawn.

Hitchhiking tourism as the pursuit of existential authenticity

In western anthropology, hitchhiking is an activity independent of tourism. There is a long history of hitchhiking in European and North American countries. Mahood (2016) historically examined the hitchhiking of Canadian youth; she referred to youth hitchhiking in terms of "wanderlust" and the quest for romanticism. Before it was restricted to highways throughout Canada from the 1970s, hitchhiking showed that people believe mobility is a democratic right whereas both the hitchhiker and the motorist consent to the ride. Hitchhiking became less common due to the decreasing cost of travel of commercial tourism; however, it remained a "rite of passage" for youth and was linked to alternative forms of tourism such as gap-year travel, backpacking, volunteer tourism, and study abroad. The practice of hitchhiking has recently invited many studies on gender-related issues and helping behaviours (Guéguen & Lamy, 2013). The decline in hitchhiking also resonates with the claim that social trust among people in the developed world is decreasing (Chesters & Smith, 2001). Although risk-taking is often considered to be a part of the experience, indicating that hitchhikers are well aware of the activity's uncertainties, they also experience extreme kindness and hospitality in the experience, and, therefore, the reward for positive experiences makes the risk-taking worthwhile (Garner, 2008). Hitchhiking could be explained by the practice of nomadism and territoriality. Nomadism and territoriality are theoretical attempts to explain the relationship between humans and space (Jansen-Verbeke, 2009; Conradson & Latham; Sack, 1986). Nomadism emphasizes the movement of people between spaces whereas territoriality often involves a specific space or territory (Hannam, 2009). The hitchhiking experience involves the way in which nomadism is practiced and how the road-scape and automobile space become the shared territory of the driver and hitchhiker.

The contemporary connection between hitchhiking and tourism has been established mainly in the area of alternative tourism including slow tourism and lifestyle mobility (O'Regan, 2012, 2013). As a "rite of passage", the hitchhiking experience may be viewed as liminal, and they are deliberately chosen as ways to initiate a novel understanding of the world through unstructured, unplanned, and unregulated practices (O'Regan, 2012). Hitchhiking tourism is also viewed as a form of backpacking (Uriely et al., 2002). Such mobilities indicate shifts in the connectedness, experiences, and motivations of tourism activities. Hitchhiking is both a practice and a performance that has its own set of norms (O'Regan, 2013). In this study, it is defined as a form of tourism with hitchhiking as the main activity and the primary mode of mobility. Hitchhiking tourists seek adventure and collaboration, as viewed by Nishijima (2012), they are "amateur anthropologists" who aim to access the unmediated reality and discover something both extraordinary and authentic from the journey. Every single trip is a unique journey for individuals and a collective act of the improvised social relations on the road-scape (O'Regan, 2013).

This article considers dwelling to be the philosophical basis for the mobility of hitchhiking tourism and the pursuit of existential authenticity. In Heidegger's *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, the notions of building and dwelling are complex philosophical contentions. Dwelling is not an end to building but rather a relational engagement with materials and the environment. It emphasizes *being-in-the-*

world and is interpreted using the concept of authenticity in various conceptual fields (Cloke & Jones, 2001; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Todres & Galvin, 2010). This relational notion highlights humans *working with* materials over *doing to* them (Ingold, 2011). Todres and Galvin (2010) propose the concepts of "dwelling-mobility" and "existential mobility" to describe the socio-psychological state of well-being. While dwelling represents peacefulness and homecoming, both movement and settlement can lead to wellbeing through "authentic movement" to reach "existential well-being" (p.3, Todres & Galvin, 2010).

The dwelling perspective from Ingold (2011) highlights process over product and defines activity "by the attentiveness of environmental engagement rather than the transitivity of means and ends" (p. 10). An important aspect of the dwelling relationship is between human and space. In dwelling, temporal and spatial possibilities are provided to both humans and their habitat to be changed, developed, embedded, and resisted. Put in the context of nature, space, and the change in landscapes, Cloke and Jones (2001) identified dwelling as *being-in-the-place*. They suggested that dwelling should be used in adaptation to the flow of ideas, people, and materials that constitute and co-construct these places. Dwelling in association with space and spacing is also linked to the embodiment and embeddedness of experiences (Cloke & Jones, 2001). Such embodiment and embeddedness also inform the experiences of tourism (Pons, 2003). As Pons (2003) put it, "movement is not only a requirement to arrive at places, it is a way of inhabiting and apprehending them" (p. 62). The connections between dwelling and movement invite discussions on the experience of mobility as a form of existence.

There is a trend in the tourism literature towards examining embodied tourist experiences. Steiner and Reisinger (2006) explained existential authenticity in tourism, stating that dwelling refers to how humans project openings and possibilities in light of their own authentic or inauthentic being. An authentic self is transient; its authentic and inauthentic tendencies and expectations appear in tourist experiences (Brown, 2013; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Existential authenticity includes interpersonal and intrapersonal authenticity (Wang, 1999) as the authentic self dwells both in the self and with others. Hall (2007) suggests that authenticity should be about people and the connections between them. A hitchhiker is a nomad who is consistently on the move and engages in wanderlust and identity-seeking. Therefore, the practice of hitchhiking can be viewed as the pursuit of existential authenticity, whereby interpersonal and intrapersonal authenticity can be achieved.

On the road: transient social interactions and trust among strangers

Social interactions are key indicators and constructs of social relationships, which, in the context of tourism, are important components of the tourist experience. Social interaction on the road refers to the interaction between guests and hosts as well as among tourists. The intensity of social relationships positively affects tourists' attitudes and experiences (Pizam, Uriely, & Reichel, 2000). Tourists and hosts are the two basic groups in the tourism industry (McNaughton, 2006). Giovanardi, Lucarelli, and Decosta (2014) suggest that tourists and hosts interact and co-perform, and performativity is essential in tourist experiences. In a recent study on the Mosuo ethnic tribe in China, host and guest interactions are found to be deceptive and performative; self-orientalism and joke-work are adopted as approaches of covert resistance (Wei, Qian, & Sun, 2018). The host community's attitude can affect the intention to interact with tourists (Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006). The host-related research in tourism often adopts the perspectives of tourism impact and community development (Brunt & Courtney, 1999). Drawing on the concept of cultural intimacy, Allon and Anderson (2010) report that the types of embodied encounters between tourists and hosts and among tourists reflect novel relations of social and physical community formation, sexual practices and occurrences of danger, discomfort, and violence. Using economic exchange theory, Bimonte and Punzo (2016) construct a model to quantitatively assess the host-guest interaction and find that the exchange of resource-space occurs when the costs and benefits perceived by hosts-guests are in a balanced state.

In addition to tourist-host interactions, interactions between tourists are also examined in the literature; for example, social situation analysis identifies the key components of backpackers' social interactions and explores the phenomenon of word-of-mouth promotion among backpackers (Murphy, 2001). White and White (2008) examine the social interactions between tourists traveling to the outback in Australia and show that companionship provides a sense of security, especially in remote regions. Social interaction is a major segmenting factor in the travel motivations of Chinese backpackers, along with self-actualization, destination experience, and escape and relaxation (Chen et al., 2014). Tourists, particularly backpackers, have been found to desire the company of others. Though temporary, their relationships and interactions are free from obligation, consisting of ritualized interchanges. Interactions between tourists enrich their understanding of the cultural and physical environment, offering comfort and companionship.

Social interactions on the road affect not only the tourists' perceptions of the place and "the other" visited but also the positioning of the self and the metaphysical outcomes of the tourism experience. The Canadian tourists participating in Filep et al.'s (2017) study experienced eudaimonic growth through the encounter but did not maintain contact with the benefactors. In an examination of the virtual ethnography of post-Mao Chinese backpackers to Macau, Ong and du Cros (2012) reveal that Chinese backpackers value social interaction and peer affirmation as maintaining and developing friendships and communities are important both virtually and through lived travel experiences. According to Chen et al. (2014), young people in China seek activities such as backpacking to ease anxiety and confusion as well as the 'trust crisis' caused by China's tremendous change and rapid development (Rosen, Lafontaine, & Hendrickson, 2011). However, the tourism literature has yet to empirically inspect social interaction, particularly social interaction with strangers, in non-institutionalized tourism situations.

The universal trust among strangers is at the root of every social encounter in tourism (Filep et al., 2017). Trust has been examined in multiple disciplines and usually unfolds from two levels: the individual and the societal. On the individual level, trust is considered to be a psychological state of the individual, where the trustor, with positive expectations, risks being vulnerable to the trustee (Rousseau et al., 1998). Interpersonal trust avoids the uncertainty and expense associated with trying to enforce formal and informal agreements. In particular, trust among strangers is embedded in the short-term contact and transient social interactions that

occur in tourism, which comprise the experience of tourists and hold long-term social significance. On the societal level, social trust is considered to be the shared property and collective psychological state of a social group. Considering the societal aspect, social trust is a component of social capital., which includes structural, cognitive, and relational dimensions (Lin & Erickson, 2013; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1997; Putnam, 1993). Trust is a component of relational social capital, which refers to the behavioural aspects of social relationships (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1997). Various sub-aspects of social capital, such as reciprocity, social networks and social norms, often appear in the tourism research, and the phenomenon of tourism is itself a process of social capital production (Filep et al., 2017; Heimtun, 2007; White & White, 2008). In the context of hitchhiking, the social interactions between hitchhiking tourists and those between hitchhiking tourists and drivers are almost all civil actions that do not involve previous social networks and social connections. Therefore, understanding how hitchhiking tourists adopt temporary social networks and conduct transient social interactions in their experiences contributes to understanding how social trust functions in non-institutionalized mobility situations.

Methods

Considering hitchhiking as a mode of alternative transportation taken by independent tourists, and given the explorative nature of this research, the data were collected in the form of travel blogs on two renowned Chinese independent travel websites, Qyer and Mafengwo, with the subject of travel forums and the keyword hitchhiking ("Dache" in Chinese). In recent years, travel blogs and online user-generated content have proven to be credible sources of data for tourism studies in the areas of destination image, tourism experiences, and destination marketing (Li & Wang, 2011; Tse & Zhang, 2013; Zhou, 2014). While the development of information technology has led to the increased application of big data in the tourism research, analyses of travel blogs can take advantage of the development of new software. This article used the online data retrieving software Bazhuayu to examine hitchhiking blogs and other relevant information from the two websites.

An initial keyword search conducted in January 2017 revealed 205 valid blogs from Qyer and 125 from Mafengwo, and a total of 330 blogs were collected. The main objective of this research was to identify the experiences of Chinese hitchhiking tourists and the roles of social interactions in these experiences, and two separate analytical strategies were used. The 330 hitchhiking blogs were analysed using the software Bazhuayu with the aim of profiling Chinese hitchhiking tourists and their mode of traveling. Among the 330 blogs, 212 bloggers were hitchhiking in China, and 118 were traveling and hitchhiking internationally. The top Chinese and international hitchhiking destinations are shown in Figs. 1 and 2 below.

Non-urban destinations in the northwest and southwest of China were found to be popular domestic destinations for hitchhiking tourists, among which Tibet was the most common destination. The specific route favoured by hitchhiking tourists and backpackers was China National Highway 318 (G318), which runs from Shanghai to Zhangmu on the China-Nepal border. It is the longest China National Highway at 5476 km in length, and it runs west from Shanghai towards Zhejiang, Anhui, Hubei, Chongqing, and Sichuan and ends in Tibet. The part of G318 from Sichuan to Tibet is a well-known route for hitchhiking and biking. Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Yunnan are also popular domestic hitchhiking destinations. Hitchhiking activities were also found to be undertaken internationally by Chinese tourists, with destinations on all continents. Popular countries for hitchhiking included Thailand, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Japan, the US, and New Zealand. Additionally, 248 blogs mentioned the status of companionship, and among those, 103 (41.5%) were hitchhiking with a partner or a friend and 145 (58.5%) were alone.

A manual screening process was conducted to select blogs written by hitchhiking tourists who use hitchhiking as their main mode of transportation to collect substantive descriptions of the experiences. In total, 93 travel blogs with thorough descriptions of hitchhiking experiences were collected. Among these blogs, 15 were about international and 78 about domestic hitchhiking trips.

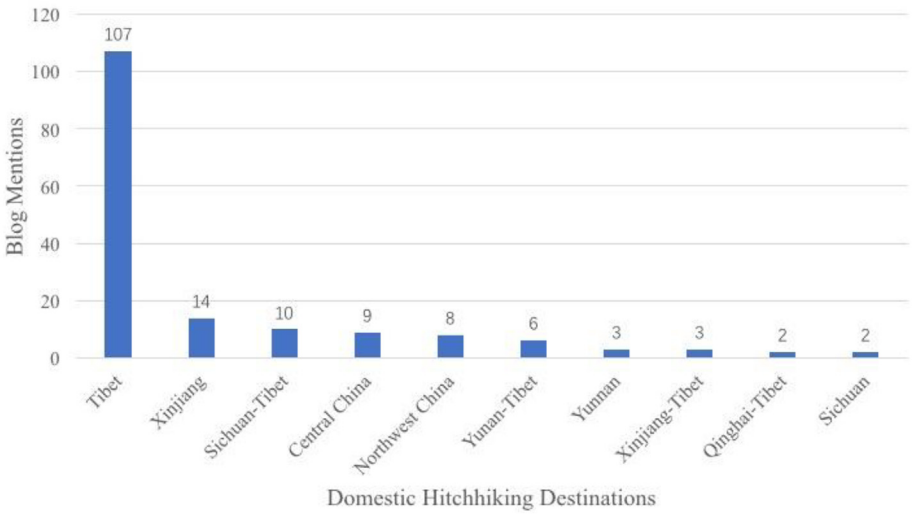

Fig. 1. Top domestic destinations from Chinese hitchhiking blogs.

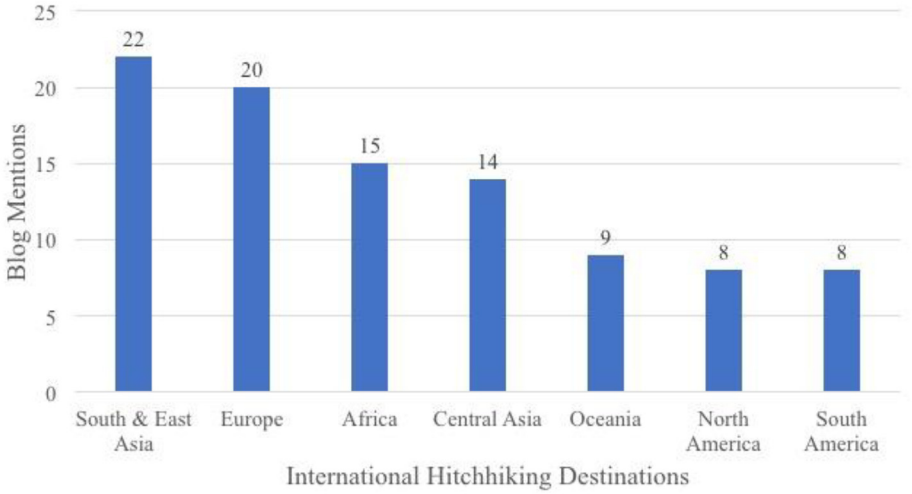

Fig. 2. Top international destinations from Chinese hitchhiking blogs.

These blogs were imported into the analytical software Nvivo 10. The author is a native Chinese person and thus was capable of conducting the analysis and interpretation in Chinese. A few randomly selected blog titles and scripts were translated into English for presentation purposes. Table 1 shows the selected titles of the travel blogs translated from Chinese.

The goal of phenomenological research is to understand and describe lived experiences (Daly, 2007) and to find the essence of the structure of the described experience (Ueda & Sakugawa, 2009). Phenomenological studies have been conducted to understand tourists' experiences in many situations such as tourists' experiences in a historical precinct (Hayllar & Griffin, 2005), tourists' recollection of swim-with-dolphin experiences (Curtin, 2010), and the meaning of genealogical tourists' experiences (Santos & Yan, 2010). This research considers hitchhiking to be a socially constructed experience. Travel blogs are perceived as personal narratives of these experiences, and they reflect the context and meaning of events.

Because hitchhiking is a unique experience for Chinese backpackers, with fairly limited existing research, this study adopts a grounded theory technique of open coding and axial coding to develop and group key statements (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Open coding follows an inductive process to attach descriptive terms to the data and to identify themes related to the motivations and experiences of hitchhiking tourists. The codes related to social interactions and social encounters are grouped separately. Axial coding was conducted to identify the relationships among various themes and to connect the codes on social interactions with hitchhiking experiences. Table 2 shows the initial codes, themes and categories. The main data categories include motivations, the hitchhiking process, the meaning of hitchhiking, experiences of emotion, and interaction as experimentation. Last, the themes and categories relating to hitchhiking experiences were grouped into textual and structural descriptions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, cited in Cresswell, 2013). Statements were also developed to describe the relationships between transient social interactions and the hitchhiking experience, and theoretical connections were formed. The following section reports the key findings of this study.

Findings

The experiences of hitchhiking tourism are full of nuances and embody complex personal and social details. The following section reports the motivations and experiences of hitchhiking tourism in the search for existential authenticity. The findings also suggest that through transient social interactions, hitchhiking tourists experiment on the kindness of strangers and social trust. Although the social interactions were temporary, they had long-term effects on the personal experiences of the tourists and on the presentation of local communities as friendly and “hitchable” societies.

Motivations for hitchhiking tourism

Most of the travel blogs explained the reasons for the choice of hitchhiking; the need for this explanation highlights the niche

Table 1
Selected hitchhiking blog titles.

- Cycling and hitchhiking in Russia: traveling means tasting all the flavours
- Hitchhiking to the end of the world – Argentina and Chile
- Adventures of hitchhiking in the West – Tibet – Xinjiang – Gansu – Sichuan
- 21 days and 2400 yuan: touring Yunnan and Tibet on hitchhikes and buses
- Don't call me silly: Crazy girls' five hitchhiking trips to Tibet
- 8 months of hitchhiking, cycling, and hiking around China

Table 2
Codes and categories.

Research questions	Open coding	Themes (sub-themes)	Categories
Motivation	Reason for hitchhiking, being wild, personal belief, representing China, Experiencing the world	Personal belief (View of value, life and world, novelty seeking) Self-realization and transformation (Facing uncertainty, embracing difference) Experience of humanity External influence	Motivation
Process & Experiences	Tips for success, luck, freeloader, attitude, personal belief, changing stereotypes representing China, forever, single ladies, origin of hitchhiking in China, feeling of pity	Cost saving Spontaneity Characteristics of hitchhiking (Pragmatics and information, ways to increase success rate) Challenges (Safety and risk, emotional struggle) Positive emotion (Confidence, joy, feeling of luck, perseverance) Negative emotion (Despair, anxiety, frustration, hopeless) Neutral emotion (Go with the flow, live the moment, emotional adjustment)	The hitchhiking process Experience of emotion
	safety concern, trust, reciprocity, gratitude, perceived characteristics of hitchhiking, pragmatics and information collection, confidence, challenge, language and interaction, freedom, risk	Life philosophy (Personal belief, ambiguity) Social meaning (Reflection on kindness of other people, strengthening identity) Transient network (Partnership, short-term friendship, people and stories) Shared norms (Language and interaction, reciprocity and gratitude) Trust Experimentation	Meaning of hitchhiking Interaction as experimentation
Social interaction	Partnership, short-term friendship, single ladies, reciprocity, gratitude, kindness and friendliness of stranger, people and stories		

status of this particular type of tourism. The bloggers were mostly first-time hitchers; a few had previous hitchhiking experience. The motivations to hitchhike resulted from many internal and external influences. Internally, there was a surge to “try something different” driven by the temptation of wanderlust. Externally, this motivation comes from the influence of other people's experiences, the media, art, and literature. The motivational themes include *Personal belief*, *Self-realization and transformation*, *Experience of humanity*, *External influences*, *Cost saving,* and *Spontaneity*.

The bloggers were mostly young people, and inferring from the blogs' content, they were strong believers of interpersonal and intrapersonal free will. This belief drove them to be insensitive to the potential risks of hitchhiking. Chinese hitchhikers consider the activity to be a form of self-realization and transformation as encountering challenges, strangeness and especially kindness is an experience of humanity:

Hitchhiking reflects the trust between people; the beauty of humanity always fascinates me.

(*Blog-65*)

I chose to hitchhike because I feel that I can chat with different people and I hope to learn from others' life stories, which can give me a little inspiration. By myself, I live and see a small world, the stories I meet are limited, but chatting with different people, the world I see is infinitely enlarged.

(*Blog-15*)

Motivations for hitchhiking include intrinsic personal beliefs and the aim of self-transformation as well as external influences from the media and bloggers' social circles. Travel blogging websites have become self-media platforms and have become a powerful channel for communication in China along with the *Net Red* (Internet celebrities) phenomenon. The self-media promote independence, self-branding and self-achievement among young people. For example, the ground-breaking documentary “To Berlin by Thumb,” mentioned in the introduction of this article, was frequently cited in the blogs as an eye-opener, and the creators of the documentary were mentioned as pioneers and role models by the Chinese hitchhiking tourists. The actions of *Net Red* also have a strong impact on the travel styles and lifestyles of young people.

Similar to alternative tourism activities that involve high risk, the motivations for hitchhiking as revealed in the blogs were centred around personal and subjective factors that have both push and pull effects on hitchhikers. One distinction, however, involves

the themes of *cost savings* and *spontaneity*. The cost of transportation comprises a major part of a tourist's expenditures; therefore, traveling for free makes hitchhiking tourism appealing to young, budget-sensitive Chinese hitchhikers. One blogger wrote:

> *I hitchhiked and travelled for 150 days, I did not aim to search for the purpose of travelling but to build up strong willpower and go beyond certain limits through the challenging travels, and also to see the world at fairly low cost, making the optimal use of my time and money. I treat hitchhiking and travelling as self-cultivation.*
>
> (*Blog 83*)

Chinese hitchhiking tourists are motivated by the expected rich experience accompanied by the low cost of the activity. Many bloggers were first-time hitchhikers, and they considered the activity as a "rite of passage" to celebrate a personal milestone. Others who hitchhiked more often treated backpacking and hitchhiking as mobile lifestyles. Hitchhiking can be planned or spontaneous. In some cases, hitchhiking is unplanned, and putting one's thumb out for the first time is a mindful and embodied experience. The contemplation of "being a free loader" seems to be a moral decision for many bloggers, and they coped with the uncertainties and emotional struggles of morality in the process and experience of hitchhiking, which is discussed in the following section.

Process and experience of hitchhiking tourism

Online platforms serve as communities for alternative tourists and represent the shared identity and collectivity of hitchhiking tourists. The Chinese tourists shared the hitchhiking language of using thumbs and boards to increase their success rate and showed the common trait of seeking existential authenticity. The process of hitchhiking described in the blogs includes the challenges experienced by hitchhiking tourists, their emotional experiences, and their meaning-making.

Challenges of hitchhiking

A major topical theme in the hitchhiking blogs was the challenges encountered during the process, which mainly include risk management, safety concerns, and emotional struggles. Hitchhiking is associated with uncertainties that involve risks, dangers, and failures. However, the risks and safety concerns are more prominent among solo female hitchhikers. Due to the male-dominated environment on the road, the bloggers suggested that female hitchhikers partner with males to reduce the potential risks of sexual assault. As the bloggers described,

> *Along the way, the Tibetan guy always asked me if I was married, if I had a boyfriend, and he said that he would introduce me to Tibetan boys.*
>
> (*Blog-43*)

> *Two men or one woman seem to find it harder to catch a ride than a man and a woman. Drivers may feel unsafe with two men in the vehicle, the woman may feel unsafe alone by herself….*
>
> (*Blog-14*)

> *Before you go into the vehicle, you have to make sure how many people are already inside. If there are many, I suggest not entering, especially girls. Make sure you see what goes on in the vehicle. If you observe anything suspicious, do not go inside.*
>
> (*Blog 83*)

A few single female hitchhikers revealed their interactions with some overly enthusiastic male drivers and suggested methods of self-protection, including pretending to be married and bringing fake marriage certificates. There were gendered concerns on the potential challenges of this activity. Male hitchhikers had a higher chance of being rejected, as they posed more threat to the drivers, while female hitchhikers had a higher risk of violence and more safety concerns. The risks associated with hitchhiking often concern personal safety, and crimes such as robbery and sexual violence were occasionally reported by the hitchhikers, especially among those traveling alone. Although none of the blogs reported cases of violence, the hitchhiking tourists were generally aware of measures to ensure their safety, including finding a hitchhiking partner, staying connected, and being well-prepared for the trip both physically and psychologically.

Although this research did not aim to examine hitchhiking tourists' experiences across national cultures, cultural differences were anticipated and prepared for by outbound hitchhiking tourists. A prominent example is the language barrier, which hindered the effectiveness of communication. The intent of hitchhiking was better communicated in countries with a higher acceptance of it, and mobile translation applications contributed to eliminating language barriers. While more planned hitchhiking trips occurred in international destinations, hitchhiking was sometimes spontaneous and unplanned when the tourists travelled domestically. The other challenges of facing uncertainty and risk are associated with the experience of emotion, which is not always negative, and it is embraced by hitchhikers as the intrinsic value of the experience.

Experience of emotion

By analysing the blogs, the emotion of each experience was categorized as negative, positive or neutral. While hitchhiking is a slow mode of travel, hitchhikers had unique experiences of time that were associated with the experience of emotion. Negative emotion was experienced with the prolonged waits and challenges experienced in the process such as the feeling of despair, anxiety, and frustration when facing rejection and experiencing failure. As the bloggers stated,

> *You don't know when the next ride is, you don't know what kind of person will be driving, and you don't know where you are staying today.*

(*Blog-36*)

I like this uncertainty, and I take things as they come.

(*Blog-43*)

The initiation to hitchhiking was the most difficult; however, once successful, confidence was built, and the hitchhikers became increasingly determined to continue the journey. The experience of emotion also includes a neutral emotion: a state of mind that resonates with the philosophy of dwelling and the search for existential authenticity, as reflected in the themes of going with the flow, living in the moment, and undergoing emotional adjustment. Positive emotions include the feeling of confidence, joy, and luck when experiencing success as well as the feeling of appreciation.

The hitchhiking experience allows tourists to make contact with strangers: these positive emotions were outcomes of social interaction. Overall, hitchhikers' experiences with emotion are the embodiment of their encounters with the road, automobiles and strangers, which reshape and reform their identities. The unstructured and unplanned state of being on the road provides a liminal space in which the hitchhiker can immerse him or herself and dwell in the moment. The hitchhiker is a nomad who stays in and engages fully with a temporary territory. Such engagements are also experiences of meaning-making when hitchhikers attached various meanings to the emotions and attempted to fulfill the needs of social interaction, self-expression and realization.

Meaning-making

The meaning-making in hitchhiking is related to the intrinsic motivations indicated in the bloggers' narratives on two themes: life philosophy and social meaning. The discovery of a life philosophy appeared in gaining the strength to face life obstacles and to tolerate ambiguity as well as in the experience of being independent. Hitchhiking is considered a novel and meaningful experience that provides life inspiration. As bloggers wrote,

Only by understanding the values of travellers will you understand that walking the hard road represents lowering the demand for material comforts, overcoming all unexpected situations and trying to solve them. You have dreams and you are young, so support yourself, pay for your travel, and be responsible for your behaviour.

(*Blog-14*)

You think the hardest part is to summon up the courage to stretch out your arm. In fact, when you put your thumb out, there may not be a car willing to take you; if there is, they may not go to the same destination; if they go to the same destination, there may not be a seat for you; if they have a seat for you, you may not want to take it. It is so much like life: it looks like there are many people on the same road, but you have very little company; whatever you think is important may not matter at all.

(*Blog-54*)

The meaning-making characteristics of hitchhiking experiences also represent the pursuit of existential authenticity. Social meaning is created through the transient social interactions with strangers on the road. Many of these interactions resulted in reflection upon the kindness of others and the strengthening of self-identity among the hitchhiking tourists. In relation to the motivation to experience humanity, hitchhikers emphasized learning and building empathy through social interaction. Such social interactions provided ways for the hitchhikers to exchange travel information and personal stories. The kindness of strangers often exceeds the offering of a ride. One blogger described a hitchhiking trip in Egypt in which he and his partner were picked up by a local truck driver and brought to a local village for dinner; many others blogged about their experiences of being treated to meals by drivers and local people. When facing the kindness of strangers, the hitchhikers felt love, power and faith. Additionally, by observing the lives of other people, the hitchhikers reflected on their own identities and the value of life. Social meaning in hitchhiking is built through social interactions with fellow hitchhikers, drivers and other social groups met on the road.

Social interaction in hitchhiking tourism as experimentation

As identified from travel blogs, the social interactions in hitchhiking tourism are fragmented and varied in depth and content, but there are some common characteristics such as a sense of reciprocity, gratitude, and performativity. Moreover, a major category is identified by connecting social interaction with the motivation and experience of hitchhiking tourism in that social interaction in hitchhiking tourism represents experimentation with social trust.

Characteristics of social interactions in hitchhiking tourism

In the examination of travel blogs, fragmented narratives on social interactions were found, and many hitchhiking tourists recalled every encounter they experienced. They reported the content of interactions and expressed gratitude in the blogs towards the people who offered help during their trips. Due to the varied lengths of these interactions, the depth of conversations varied. In some blogs where hitchhiking tourists were given a long ride, they shared personal stories and discussed their trips with the drivers and reflected on different lifestyles and cultures. One hitchhiker wrote about his encounter with an Islamic driver:

"The second driver who took us was also local, he was a Muslim, and in the one-hour trip I got to know about the Islamic religion, which had been mysterious to me all my life, about their religious discipline, feedback on our society, and about their views on desire and resistance. When we reached a spot with a beautiful view, he would stop and let us take photos, and we felt very flattered."

(*Blog 60*)

These narratives on social interactions indicate that being on the road increases one's chances of meeting strangers and sharing life stories. Most of the interactions remained transient; however, some led to friendship and long-term contact with the help of now-ubiquitous information technology and the use of social media. Transient social interactions provided bridging connections between tourists and the locality. Hitchhiking tourists' social interactions with drivers were often purposive: the hitchhiking tourists deliberately sought opportunities for a ride or partnership. Although most hitchhiking tourists reported that they were up front about their purpose when requesting rides, a few chose to fabricate their hitchhiking purpose and pretended to be lost or to have had their wallet stolen because they were concerned they would be criticized as freeloaders and would "lose face". There are unbalanced power relationships in these interactions. When facing uncertainty, the hitchhiking tourists tended to act weak and vulnerable to evoke sympathy and to gain resources towards a successful ride. As expressed in the blogs:

I went forward and said "I want to go to Duo ma, could you please take me? I have waited here for a long time", and then I put on a pitiful face.

(*Blog 35*)

Usually, I would hide my real identify when I hitchhike. I would say I am still a student and young, so this would make them (the drivers) be sympathetic, they would think I am financially not capable of paying for my ride, and also, they would not rob me.

(*Blog 14*)

Therefore, even though the hitchhiking tourists aimed for non-institutionalized mobility experiences, the process required them to use communication and interaction techniques build from their daily social lives to complete the ride. However, in these social interactions, many hitchhiking tourists chose to conceal their identity or real information to protect their privacy. There is a strong sense of performativity from the tourists when they participated in interactions with strangers on the road. These social interactions in a non-institutionalized and mobile setting reflect the views of the hitchhiking tourists on reciprocity, gratitude and social trust.

Reciprocity, gratitude and social trust

While in the process of identifying a ride and sharing the journey, social interaction involved the contemplation of social exchange and indicated the importance of social trust. Many bloggers expressed concern about its moral implications. Due to the collective cultural emphasis on reciprocity and showing gratitude, the Chinese hitchhiking tourists engaged in non-commercial exchanges as well as some material exchanges. Many brought souvenirs, postcards, and photos to give to drivers, while others shared their stories and companionship as an exchange. Regarding reciprocity and gratitude, the bloggers wrote,

On the way, I will give a most sincere smile to everyone who has helped me, and I will also prepare a polaroid camera and photo paper, some small gifts, and a thankful heart that brings warmth to all the people I meet.

(*Blog-89*)

I think mutual help is important, I am happy every time I hitchhike because if the driver encounters any problem on the road, I will help, like help add water to the truck or change a tire. I did not just sit still or leave. Of course, this should be based on the situation and your ability; you should help when you can.

(*Blog 58*)

There is mutual interpersonal trust between the hitchhiker and the driver. Some bloggers used drivers' facial appearance to determine whether they were trustworthy, whereas others expressed that "they trusted me enough to let me into their vehicle; how could I not trust them?" Trust on the individual level among strangers also represents societal trust on a larger scale. The socio-cultural context of the destinations along the road was the soil of trust and kindness. The existence of societal social trust provides the foundation for the hitchhiking practice. Although distrust and negative social experiences may be encountered, the blogs mostly reported neutral and positive experiences. By connecting the themes of the experiences and the transient social interactions identified from the blogs, a direction for theorization emerged upon viewing the social interactions and the overall hitchhiking tourism experiences as experimentation by the tourists.

Social interaction as experimentation

Hitchhiking tourists were motivated by the intrinsic need for self-transformation and the appeal of nomadism; they joined a quest to experiment upon themselves personally and on society. As indicated in the motivations of hitchhiking tourism, experiencing humanity is a major theme. Personally, they aimed at the personal challenge of handling uncertainty and ambiguity, while socially, the experience of humanity could be viewed as an experiment on the level of interpersonal and societal social trust through their transient social interactions with strangers on the road. Individual trust is the foundation for building transient social networks and inter-personal interactions; these networks further contributed to the success of completing a hitchhiking trip and to the unique mobility experience. On the individual level, the outcomes of social interactions are determined by hitchhiking tourists' communication abilities and other hidden interpersonal traits. On the societal level, despite some negative experiences, most hitchhiking tourists received kindness from strangers. Young hitchhiking tourists were confused and stressed under commercialized culture and the overly rapid material development in China, and they sought to find non-commercialized humanity through this non-institutionalized activity. Through these transient social interactions, tourists formed a collective identity, gained awareness of intercultural and interpersonal diversity, and regenerated their faith in social trust.

The fact that tourists aimed to experience social exchange outside of their usual and stable social networks and anticipated potential risks and challenges to experiment with their personal strength and social trust indicated the non-institutionalized and non-

commercial nature of hitchhiking tourism. The kindness and gratitude experienced by hitchhiking tourists have a high social impact on how they view society and the world. They did not merely build confidence on the personal level, as they reported building willpower and grit, they also gained more faith in society and reflected on how to be a global citizen. By experimenting on the self and society, hitchhiking tourists extended and enhanced their experiences. As they wrote:

> *I did not have high expectations, but through the trip, I felt the warmth from society, whenever I feel disappointed about society, I feel warm recollecting these kindnesses.*
>
> (*Blog 88*)

> *I thought about what the Muslim driver said, "I help you, you may not have the opportunity to help me back, but you will help others", and I was suddenly enlightened, so I give these words to those who did not understand why people would let strange backpackers in their car. It is because people believe in the give and return of goodness.*
>
> (*Blog 60*)

In summary, hitchhiking experiences are strongly influenced by the transient social interactions that occur in the process. Hitchhiking tourists fulfill their need for self-transformation and existential authenticity by facing the challenges and conquering their emotional struggles in the process. The Chinese hitchhiking tourists gained faith on the society as they experience kindness and help from strangers. More importantly, the tourists are freed from the traditional *Guanxi* networks and seek more individualized social identity through the hitchhiking experience.

Discussion

From the alternative mobility viewpoint, spatial behaviours that involve patterns and experiences of human mobility indicated the territoriality of the Chinese hitchhiking tourists who presented many changes in establishing, maintaining, and defending their spatial boundaries with increased mobility (Gretzel & Jamal, 2009; Larsen & Jacobsen, 2009). Hitchhiking tourists seek to invade the private space of a vehicle and rely on interpersonal trust and accepted cultural norms to complete the process. This explains the popularity of G318 as a hitchhiking destination, where the norms and acceptance of hitchhiking have been cultivated. The experiences of hitchhiking tourists were what Hannam (2009) called "doing" tourism, which includes the characteristics of territoriality and nomadism. The hitchhiking tourism experience is influenced by both agency and structure. The Chinese hitchhiking tourists were young, independent, open to new frontiers, and outward looking. The increasing flow of information on hitchhiking destinations and the lack of regulation have also exerted a structural influence on its occurrence. While the young Chinese backpackers challenged traditional cultural norms and social stereotypes by independently reaching out to the world, they also aimed to form partnerships and show gratitude for the kindness they encountered to construct their socio-cultural identity and unique worldview.

Hitchhiking tourists and the destination's road-scape mutually and fluidly encounter, reshape, and reform, through which identities and territories are constructed and reconstructed. In terms of dwelling, a hitchhiking tourist becomes a nomad who stays in and fully engages with a temporary territory. Hitchhiking as such contains the immobilities and restrained mobilities of tourists in the pursuit of existential authenticity as reflected in their emotional experiences of facing uncertainty, anxiety, ambiguity and even failure (Brown, 2013). Emotional experiences are dominant in the narratives of hitchhiking tourists. Negative and positive emotions have become not only ways to discover the self but channels of world-making for tourists (Tucker & Shelton, 2018). Moreover, the sense of time is prevalent in hitchhiking; in particular, the emotion associated with the experience of time is a key element of the hitchhiking experience during the time-consuming process of waiting, expecting, and riding along. The findings of this research resonate with the other research on backpackers and strengthens the argument that hitchhiking tourists develop multiple abilities of communication, perseverance, self-confidence, and reciprocity in the process to obtain learning, charisma, romanticism, and inspirational experiences (Chen et al., 2014; Mahood, 2016).

From a cultural comparison perspective, many of the same factors that moved Westerners in the 1960s and 1970s to take to the road may be present in China today. The mobility characteristics of Chinese hitchhiking tourists are similar to the mobility characteristics of Western backpackers, which are post-identitarian, representing a form of neonomadism and indicating that individuals can exercise their skills along the way (D'Andrea, 2006). Other similarities are the alternative nature and the romantic and utopian perception of this form of mobility. However, unlike many anthropologists reporting that hitchhiking may often be religious or rebellious, the Chinese hitchhikers had a more tourism-related purpose and wished to explore and experiment the world. Insofar as the ethos in China differs from that in many of the Western destinations studied, China's collective culture inevitably influences Chinese hitchhiking tourists' individualism. Hitchhikers' need to provide reciprocity so as not to be seen as a "freeloader" is more intense among Chinese hitchers compared to those from the West. The concern with losing face is also unique to Chinese culture, the cultural norm exists even when tourists are outside of their *Guanxi* networks. This may explain the lack of narrative on negative experiences in the blogs that they tend to report neutral and positive experiences. When the alternative hitchhiking activity blends with the ordinary practice of auto-mobility, the hitchhiking tourists' individualism is exposed to the scrutiny of the drivers, local residents, and other tourists. The blogs revealed that such individualism is well acknowledged at mature hitchhiking destinations but less so on remote routes.

Social interactions are an important component in the hitchhiking tourists' experiences, as they leave their usual social environment to initiate exchanges with complete strangers. The interactions were mostly transient, purposive, and performative. These transient social interactions are means for hitchhiking tourists to achieve interpersonal and intrapersonal authenticity. The findings resonate with previous studies on social interaction in the tourism context (Giovanardi et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2018). There was a

strong sense of reciprocity, gratitude and trust experienced by hitchhiking tourists in the social interactions with people who offered help and showed kindness. This study confirmed that experiences of kindness and gratitude from strangers lead to the maintenance and enhancement of social capital (Filep et al., 2017). The hitchhiking tourists gained experiences beyond the experienced social interactions and expressed willingness to help other people in the future. One distinct finding of this study is the identification of social interactions in hitchhiking tourists' experiences as experimentation. Hitchhiking tourism, as well as other forms of non-institutionalized tourism, could be viewed as a means for tourists to challenge their own abilities to communicate and exchange with strangers and to experiment with societal social trust.

Conclusion

People are constantly “on the move” virtually and physically, and their needs for co-presence represent a compulsion for proximity, which can be achieved only through mobility. Mobility has become a symbol of power in society as well as a form of physical and spiritual freedom (Urry, 2002). Nowadays, heightened mobility brings more opportunities for people to interact with strangers and to spatially expand their social activities. This article explores the motivations and experiences of hitchhiking tourism as a form of alternative mobility that encourages the exchange of kindness and altruism. Hitchhiking mobility reflects the personal capacity to make mobile decisions and challenge the routine and conformity of daily life and therefore embodies transnational mobility (Conradson & Latham, 2005; Smith, 2005). Social trust is essential to a cohesive society; in this study, it is the foundation of social interactions in hitchhiking tourism. Inter-personal trust on the individual level allows tourists and drivers to co-create the hitchhiking experience. The societal social trust inherent in the destination's socio-cultural environment ensures and eliminates risks for the participants. Hitchhiking, as a unique form of tourism, may also be an act of spontaneity that represents recklessness and the growing independence of Chinese youth. This form of alternative tourism mobility also indicates a mixture of individualism and collectivism in contemporary Chinese culture. Theoretically, this study identifies the significance of transient social interactions among hitchhiking tourists and contributes to the understanding of non-institutionalized tourism mobility experiences. More significantly, it contributes to the understanding of tourism and mobility as social phenomena. Practically, it helps us understand the emerging market of Chinese alternative tourists and the growing acceptance of hitchhiking as a mode of tourist mobility in destinations with collectivist cultures.

This article benefits the field of alternative tourism mobility and the slow tourism research, but several limitations can be highlighted. First, it is debatable whether travel blogs reveal actual experiences, as travel writing itself can be a representation of an alternative (online) self for the tourists (Mcwha, Frost, & Laing, 2018). The blogs may be accurate in describing hitchhiking stories and social interactions, but experiences such as sexual encounters, violence, the use of drugs and alcohol, and reflections that are morally, emotionally or politically sensitive are not revealed in the blogs. Such issues should be further examined by conducting in-depth interviews with experienced hitchhiking tourists. Second, individual differences may influence the hitchhiking experience and the experimental outcome of social interaction. Moreover, as noted above, this article contains only stories from the hitchhiking tourists and lacks the participation of ride providers. The altruistic behaviours and perceptions of the drivers who co-create the hitchhiking tourists experience should also be examined in future studies. Finally, the socio-cultural and economic characteristics of the hitchhiking destinations were not considered in this research, and the tourists' experiences with international and domestic hitchhiking were not distinguished. Transient social interaction as experimentation with social trust can be examined in other forms of alternative and non-institutionalized tourism activities.

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