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The willingness to accept risk:
value creation in unconventional
tourism

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Abstract

The contemporary tourism industry operates within a market-oriented and rationalised logic where risk and uncertainty are primarily perceived as sources of value destruction. While such an approach provides safety and convenience, it simultaneously reduces the spontaneity and unpredictability associated with the unknown. At the same time, the opposite end of the tourism spectrum – unconventional tourism – where risk is an inherent property of the experiential, stays overlooked. To address this gap, this thesis explores how experiential value is created, negotiated, and realised through the practices of hitchhiking and couchsurfing.

The thesis develops the MARS→V theoretical model, which is based on a distinction between institutionalised and unconventional forms of tourism. Acknowledging that ‘pure’ forms of market-based and non-market travelling can be rarely found, this binary framework is used to highlight the differences between these two modes of travel to examine the roles of risk, trust, uncertainty, and agency beyond the logic of the market.

The empirical material of the thesis consists of fourteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals who engage in hitchhiking and couchsurfing. Recognising that interview accounts are shaped by narrative construction, a rigorous thematic analysis was conducted. To complement these ‘frontstage’ narratives and reduce potential bias, the researchers also undertook a ten-day autoethnographic journey, hitchhiking 1,024 kilometres across four countries. The comparison of theoretical insights, interview data, and lived experience provided methodological triangulation.

The findings demonstrate that, within unconventional tourism, risk and uncertainty are viewed as dynamic catalysts of value creation. In the absence of financial transactions, travellers rely on emotional work and communication as forms of social currency to secure mobility and accommodation. When managed through trust and intuition, risk and uncertainty become central to the generation of social bonds, hyperreality, and personal resilience outside commodified market relations.

Keywords: hitchhiking, couchsurfing, risk, uncertainty, edgework

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1. Introduction

Is it possible to travel for free, or almost for free? Usually, travelling involves spending money on transportation, accommodation, meals, and entertainment, as tourists move between places, sleep away from home, rarely have time to cook, and are expected to visit landmarks. The tourism industry provides a wide range of offers to satisfy these needs – from budget-friendly to luxurious options – yet all of them remain rooted in a capitalist market system, implying growth despite pandemics, military conflicts, and environmental concerns (Blázquez-Salom et al., 2024; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). Since the tourism industry's contribution to the climate crisis has been well documented (Hall, 2021), critical researchers advocate a degrowth perspective aimed at reducing the usage of material resources in tourism (Blázquez-Salom et al., 2024; Fletcher et al., 2019). However, in practice, tourism professionals and their customers do not demonstrate much willingness to pursue such changes (Hall, 2021; Blázquez-Salom et al., 2024).

How, in practice, can tourism use fewer resources or – more radically – operate outside market logic? How can travellers secure transportation, accommodation, food, or entertainment without spending money? In the context of urban tourism, hitchhiking and couchsurfing offer possible answers. A raised thumb at the right place and time may help get transportation and a meaningful conversation, while a carefully written Couchsurfing request may provide access to someone's home, local knowledge, and shared meals. Importantly, by avoiding market transactions, unconventional travellers sustain mobility and accommodation through social interaction and communication with strangers.

Having emerged in the 1920s and peaked in the 1960s with the spread of countercultural movements, hitchhiking became less popular during the last decades of the twentieth century (Timothy & Zhu, 2024) and some researchers (Compagni Portis, 2015; Laviolette, 2020) name “culture of fear” among possible reasons for that. Although the actual danger associated with hitchhiking had not significantly changed since the “hippie era”, negative media coverage drastically amplified public perceptions of its risk, both in the United States (Compagni Portis, 2015) and in Europe (Laviolette, 2020). At the same time, the development of neoliberalism – an economic system prioritising growth, individualism, and consumption – contributed to the decline of hitchhiking. “Inability” to provide transportation for oneself became a personal “failure” (Compagni Portis, 2015; Laviolette, 2020) while strangers on the road became potential dangers rather than fellow adventure

seekers since risk-averse behaviour became the dominant norm (O'Regan, 2012; Zinn, 2008).

As a result, non-market activities characterised by uncertainty and interpersonal risk, such as hitchhiking and couchsurfing, became marginalised niche practices. This marginalisation already positions unconventional travellers “outside of the norm”; moreover, managing uncertainty and risk within these practices further increases the need for agency and norm negotiation. The reason is that hitchhiking and couchsurfing frequently require individuals to step outside their comfort zones and socially expected behaviour. However, uncertainty in unconventional tourism has the potential not only to amplify risks and encourage norm negotiation, but also to generate value. Without a fixed travel plan, travellers often report heightened perception of experiences, more intense sensations, a feeling of freedom, serendipity, and meaningful spontaneous encounters with locals. Unconventional travellers also tend to develop a greater ability to tolerate and mitigate risks, as well as to make decisions under uncertainty. Travellers learn to evaluate strangers' trustworthiness through communication and appearance, develop skills of frontstage performance, and build the emotional capacity required to navigate diverse social situations. Over time, the improved application of these skills enables hitchhikers and couchsurfers to create greater experiential value, navigate uncertainty more effectively, remain more present, and deepen relationships with both people and places.

As demonstrated above, unconventional non-market travel practices such as hitchhiking and couchsurfing function differently from institutionalised forms of tourism. However, existing research largely overlooks these practices. For example, searches for the term “hitchhiking” in the FINN database primarily return studies from medicine and genetics, while searches for “couchsurfing” produce relatively few relevant results. Existing tourism-related studies are also largely centred on the second half of the twentieth century rather than contemporary forms of unconventional travel (Miller, 1973). More recent studies on relatively unconventional tourist practices mainly focus on backpackers (Dayour et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Iaquinto, 2022; Timothy & Zhu, 2024). However, backpackers have already developed established practices that align with institutionalised tourism, including stereotypical travel routes and national enclaves that separate travellers from local communities (Timothy & Zhu, 2024). Moreover, backpacking – particularly in the form of flashpacking – remains embedded within the market economy, making hitchhiking and couchsurfing comparatively unique practices.

The limited number of studies published during the last decade on hitchhiking (Laviolette, 2020) and couchsurfing experiences (Medina-Hernandez et al., 2024) cannot fully fill the gap. To some extent, motivations for engaging in low-cost or off-market tourist activities have been studied before (O'Regan, 2012; Week, 2012; Zuev, 2013) as well as individual risk perception (Dayour et al., 2019; Reichel et al., 2007; Ädel & Östman, 2025). However, tourism research still lacks an understanding of how non-market travel practices generate experiential value in comparison with conventional tourism. Moreover, the intersection between non-market mobility and accommodation practices remains underexplored, despite the fact that hitchhiking and couchsurfing are frequently combined in practice.

Therefore, studying unconventional tourism in the forms of hitchhiking and couchsurfing can benefit academia in several ways. Firstly, deeper exploration of value creation mechanisms within hitchhiking and couchsurfing can contribute to experience research by offering alternative perspectives on how unmediated “experiencescapes” foster active co-creation (O'Dell, 2005). Secondly, investigating the role of risk and uncertainty in unconventional travel practices can enrich risk and tourism literature by broadening the range of risky activities examined and deepening the understanding of risk influence on value creation (Holm et al., 2017). In terms of societal relevance, the study may help reassess the risks associated with hitchhiking and couchsurfing, contributing to the destigmatisation of these practices and potentially supporting the wider adoption of non-market forms of tourism.

To fill an existing research gap, this study aims to explore the mechanics of unconventional tourism and understand how travelers utilise agency and navigate risks for value co-creation and identity transformation. By developing the $M \rightarrow ARS \rightarrow V$ theoretical framework, this research intends to explain how spatial and social friction is converted into experiential values. To fulfill this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What mechanisms enable unconventional travelling?

RQ2: How are values created or destroyed in unconventional travelling?

RQ3: How do risk perception and norm negotiation influence value creation in unconventional travelling?

To answer these questions, Chapter 2 presents a literature review that positions the study within broader discussions of risk and value creation in tourism. Chapter 3 contrasts rationalised institutionalised tourism with unmediated unconventional travel and introduces the theoretical model used as the analytical framework for the study. Chapter 4

outlines the methodology and ethical considerations involved in conducting qualitative research within dynamic, unstructured, and potentially risky environments. Chapter 5 analyses how hitchhikers and couchsurfers enact agency under conditions of uncertainty and risk, as well as how unconventional travelling practices contribute to value creation or destruction. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses the empirical findings in relation to broader debates in tourism and risk studies.

In this research, hitchhiking and couchsurfing are jointly conceptualised as forms of unconventional tourism and non-market tourism – terms that are used interchangeably throughout the study. This approach is based on the observation that both practices rely fundamentally on interpersonal communication, mutual trust, and the active navigation of risk and uncertainty thereby positioning them outside institutionalised tourism. Moreover, examining these phenomena together enables a broader understanding of overarching themes such as agency, social norm negotiation, and experiential value creation as travellers frequently combine hitchhiking and couchsurfing.

2. Literature review

This literature review outlines and contrasts two polar approaches to travel: institutionalised tourism and unconventional tourism. The key differences between these tourist styles are examined through the lens of risk and uncertainty, drawing on edgework theory and the relational theory of risk. In addition, the review explores the processes of experiential value creation in tourism. We begin with outlining what risk can mean in tourism following with examining institutionalised tourism and explaining why hitchhiking and couchsurfing are conceptualised in this study as forms of unconventional tourism. Acknowledging the terminological difference between travelling and tourism, we use both terms interchangeably as synonyms in order to avoid assigning moral value or framing either conventional or unconventional tourism as inherently good or bad.

2.1. Risk as a dividing factor between institutionalised and unconventional tourism

2.1.1 Institutionalised tourism

Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) argue that mass tourism is deeply embedded in neoliberal growth logic, where increasing mobility and consumption are normalised and celebrated, often at the expense of local communities and environmental justice. As mass tourists are often time-constrained, they frequently choose to use easy accessible and convenient options with guaranteed outcomes (Cohen, 1972) meaning that within a two week vacation institutionalised tourist would rather fly, stay in an international hotel chain, and book an excursion rather than travel overland, seek the opportunity to stay with locals or explore genuinely hidden gems of the destination.

Originally, the term *institutionalised tourism* was introduced by Cohen (1972) who defined it as travelling facilitated by the tourism industry where journeys are commodified, 'standardised and mass-produced' with transportation, accommodation, and sightseeing determined in advance, giving the illusion of novelty while risk and uncertainty are minimised and controlled. Institutionalised tourism exists in the paradigm where risk and uncertainty are seen strictly as obstacles to be eliminated (Zinn, 2008, p. 5). In other words, trying to adjust and satisfy tourists' demand, the industry tries to provide predictability and control to guarantee consumer satisfaction and maximise travel efficiency (Ritzer, 2019). In

modern circumstances, platform economy and digital services largely help institutionalised tourists to select transportation, accommodation and attractions, allowing them to make decisions based on systems of verification rather than interpersonal trust (Laviolette, 2020). Destinations tend to support focus on digitalisation in order to facilitate efficiency, and experience enrichment (Leung, 2022). As a result, such a rationalised system eradicate the unpredictable *friction* of the physical world – the messy embodied reality of travel that can disrupt seamless movement of an institutionalised tourist.

Moreover, institutionalised tourists, who rely on algorithmic systems to navigate space, delegate their personal agency. Instead of confronting risk through personal intuition, mass tourists use the opportunity to outsource their risk assessment to insurance companies, ratings, social media, and recommendation platforms. This allows tourists to operate within an architecture of guaranteed outcomes and master uncertainty, however, consequently makes them influenced by platform ‘gazes’ (Cassinger and Thelander, 2021). In Mead’s (1934) terminology, this general opinion of the community or social group, orchestrating an individual’s behaviour according to social norms, can be named *generalised other*, or reactive *me*, which is the opposite to active *I* – one’s spontaneous and active response to social expectations. By catering to this reactive *me* and minimising exposure to risk, the tourism industry constructs a highly curated spatial bubble that can be described as a *safescape* – the antithesis of a *riskscape* – where danger is neutralised and commodified (Müller-Mahn, Everts, & Stephan, 2018).

However, frictionless efficiency of institutionalised tourism narrows the spectrum of possible experiences. Although such systems protect travellers from severe failure and discomfort, they simultaneously limit the possibility to get unscripted serendipitous experiences. By minimising uncertainty, institutionalised tourism also reduces the potential for unexpected encounters and spontaneous discovery, resulting in predictable experiences. As Ritzer (2019) argues, repetition and predictability fundamentally undermine enchantment, therefore, in seeking to guarantee predictable outcomes, the institutionalised tourism becomes a mechanism of disenchantment (Zinn, 2008) while ‘magical’ or ‘dreamlike’ experiences are rooted in surprise, uncertainty, and spontaneity (O’Regan, 2012; Ritzer, 2019).

2.1.2 Unconventional tourism

On the contrary, unconventional tourists tend to prioritise long-term, budget-oriented and independently organised journeys (Iaquinto, 2025; Reichenberger,

2017; Week, 2012). Importantly, hitchhikers and couchsurfers do not employ additional tourist-oriented or tourist-exclusive infrastructure, while still facilitating travelling with digital resources. Even though the initial motivation for adopting this style of travel may be financial, Reichenberger and Iaquinto (2022) emphasise that unconventional travellers can also be driven by experiential factors, particularly seek for risky, transformative, and existential experiences through highly participatory activities 'off the beaten track'. Other researchers (Timothy & Zhu, 2024; Week, 2012) also marked the seek for existential authenticity and freedom as a core motivation for engaging in unconventional travelling. Importantly, interactions and encounters with locals are placed at the forefront of the journey, serving as an essential prerequisite for its successful realisation. For example, cultural exchange and social interaction lies in the core of Couchsurfing – which functions as an accommodation network where tourists can connect with locals and stay with them for free – creating value from host-guest interactions (Medina-Hernandez et al., 2024). Within hitchhiking, potential mobility completely depends on interpersonal emotional connections based on trust between travellers and drivers (Laviolette, 2020).

Uncertainty differentiates unconventional tourism practices from institutionalised, market-based tourism (Cohen, 1972). In the rationalised tourism system, where predictability is prioritised to guarantee value creation, uncertainty is understood as a precursor to risk and potential value co-destruction (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011; Lyng, 2008). However, within unconventional tourism, uncertainty can also lead to value creation and enactment of agency. Precisely because outcomes remain unpredictable, travellers are required to make active decisions and continuously respond to changing situations (Japp & Kusche, 2008). Under conditions of uncertainty, unconventional travelers navigate space using their own visual perception, knowledge, experience, and intuition, therefore, they have to make decisions relying solely on the agency of the active I. This separation between the delegated agency of the institutionalised tourist and the agency of the unconventional traveler is one of the most important differentiating factors between the two.

Another crucial distinction between institutionalised and unconventional tourism is the way how risk is treated within each style of travelling. In unconventional travelling, agency, risk-taking, and experiencing rather than gazing plays a crucial role. Opposite to mass tourists seeking for control and predictability, unconventional travellers step out safespace where danger is neutralised and commodified into the riskscape where risk exists in relation with social practices (Müller-Mahn, Everts & Stephan 2018). Risksapes do not objectively exist on maps; they are culturally bounded and socially constructed

(Müller-Mahn, Everts, & Stephan, 2018), in other words, hitchhiking and couchsurfing are perceived as risky activities because society claims them to be such.

The difference between 1960s and mid-2020s is that in a neoliberal society hitchhiking and couchsurfing are perceived as primarily risky not just adventurous activities while risk is no longer a fate but a factor of calculation which is an individual responsibility and accident is a personal failure (Zinn, 2008). In such circumstances, willingness to take an additional risk and to hit the road or go to a stranger's place generally declines as stakes become higher. Miller (1973) frames free travelling on a road as a rebellion against settled middle-class life or an initiation to independence, when it is not a necessity. Timothy & Zhu (2024) supports this view, noting that non-market travelling can be a way to carve a new identity and reconsider life choices while volunteer risk-taking may become the only way left for feeling freedom and a manifestation of individual agency (Miller, 1973). This distinctive feature of unconventional tourism can be conceptualised through Stephen Lyng's concept of edgework.

2.1.3 Edgework in unconventional tourism

Lyng defines edgework as the voluntary participation in risky activities with the potential of serious harm to one's well-being and health so as to negotiate the boundary between 'order and disorder' (Lyng, 2008). Crucially, risk in edgework is voluntary, skill-based, and consciously sought out: participants actively pursue it while relying on specialised competencies to maintain control at the boundary between safety and catastrophe (Kidder, 2022; Yang et al., 2018). As Lupton (2023) explains, individuals engage in edgework activities because the expected value outcomes outweigh the potential dangers of such behaviour. This distinguishes edgework from other forms of risk-taking, such as accidental or poorly understood risks, as well as from purely chance-based activities. By confronting risks, practitioners 'escape institutionalised constraints of modernity', combat alienation, disenchantment, and a loss of personal agency, which ultimately allows them to discover their authentic or true self (Lyng, 2008). Crucially, this can be achieved not only through pure risk-taking and 'gambling with uncertainty' but also in a 'deliberate attempt to *resist cultural norms*' or authorities and to push bodily limits (Lupton, 2023).

Laurendeau (2008) argues that risk and gender are two constructs that intersect and influence each other, consequently, male and female travelers do not encounter identical environments but navigate risks and choose to do or not to do edgework 'within structures

of gender relations' (p. 295) which the researcher calls a *gendered risk regime*. Importantly, while male risk-takers have 'a good deal of power', female edgeworkers have to manage not only the baseline physical danger of the activity but also the pervasive gendered one (Laurendeau, 2008). Therefore, for female travelers entering the traditionally male-dominated riskscape of the highway disrupts conventional norms, amplifying the feeling of pushing boundaries. This illustrates that the ways participants 'do risk' are simultaneously the ways they negotiate and 'do gender' (Laurendeau, 2008). However, even though males and females engage in edgework and react to risks differently (Laurendeau, 2008), such activity helps both sexes in identity construction while for females 'negotiating the border' can also be an emancipatory practice to resist social expectations of being weak or dependent, allowing to gain self-confidence and independence (Yang et al., 2017).

Traditionally, in the tourism context, edgework theory is applied to adventure tourism where physical danger is central to the experience and contributes significantly to personal meaning-making (Holm et al., 2017). We, however, believe that hitchhiking and couchsurfing also can be analysed through this lens as motivations and outcomes of unconventional travellers partially intersect with those of 'pure' edgeworkers. A significant nuance here is that unconventional tourists also need to deal with normative and psychological edges, for example, connected with gender, as it was described above. Therefore, we distinguish the second dimension of edgework within unconventional travelling – *emotional edgework*. The concept of emotional edgework was introduced by Newmahr (2011) to describe activities where the goal is not merely to manage fear during a physical crisis, but to actively seek the line between emotional control and the loss of emotional control. In such activities, participants deliberately immerse themselves in spaces of potential vulnerability, relying entirely on one another to negotiate and transgress social boundaries. By doing so, Newmahr transformed edgework from a test of physical survival into a shared 'risk-trust cycle' that generates interpersonal connection.

O'Regan (2012) insists that during such activity as hitchhiking, vulnerability to the world is what makes the tourist experience real: encountering unpredictability increases the sensations, removing money restores human connections while changing monetary transactions to friction creates trust. Additionally, edgeworks are characterised by a sense of unity between the individual and their environment (Kidder, 2022). This sense of heightened self and environment perception – *hyperreality* – intensifies the experience and allows edgeworkers to sharpen their skills in managing surrounding chaos (Kidder, 2022). This aligns with Bunn (2017) argument that developing technical skills with

experience results in a sense of self-fulfillment while the ability to operate within environments with uncertainty and urgency is a must for edgeworkers. Besides skills development, edgework literature suggests that participation in high-risk activities can generate positive emotional and cognitive outcomes, including a sense of accomplishment, self-realisation, and long-term satisfaction (Bunn, 2017; Holm et al., 2017). Moreover, edgework can allow for re-enchantment of the world and contribute to subjective well-being and happiness by reducing stress and fulfilling an existential void (Holm et al., 2017). In fact, the research shows that professional careers also can benefit from leisure-based edgework activities (Lyng, 2005, as cited in Lupton, 2023).

In relation to tourist activities, edgework highlights a crucial tension: while institutionalised tourism systems increasingly aim to minimise uncertainty and construct controlled safescapes, edgework-oriented tourists actively seek out environments characterised by uncertainty and potential danger. Rather than passively consuming a rationalised safescape through digital delegation, unconventional travelers take on the burden of creating their own safety. Ultimately, participation in edgework can function as a response to the perceived routinisation and control of modern life, offering moments of autonomy, intensity, and self-determination. In this sense, edgework practices can be interpreted as a form of resistance to the rationalisation and predictability of mainstream tourism, reintroducing friction, unpredictability, and embodied agency into the travel experience.

2.2. Relational character of risk in tourism

Dominant narrative about hitchhiking and couchsurfing among non-hitchhikers and non-couchsurfers paints these activities as extremely risky ones, potentially ending with murder, burglary or rape while factually unconventional travellers face uncertainty and inconvenience. Importantly, narratives about risk conditions are culturally and socially situated, meaning that different individuals or social groups may define risk relationships differently depending on their values, knowledge, and experiences. Within this logic, for institutionalised tourists unconventional travelling can be considered to be too risky while unconventional travellers themselves can be perceived as threats by another side of the activity — drivers and hosts. To explore this relational character of risk and its mitigation in hitchhiking and couchsurfing, we employ the *relational theory of risk*.

Developed by Åsa Boholm and Hervé Corvellec (2011), the theory conceptualises *risk* as a threat which is perceived by the actor and can be mitigated through knowledge, skill, and decision-making. The theory understands risk as a relational and interpretative construct involving a connection between a *risk object* and an *object at risk* under conditions of uncertainty. Importantly, something becomes 'at risk' only when it is both valued and perceived as vulnerable to harm from the risk object. Unlike calculable risk, *uncertainty* refers to situations that cannot be fully predicted or statistically controlled (O'Malley, 2008) meaning not only lack of knowledge but also as limited ability to intervene (Boholm & Corvellec, 2011). Conversely, *danger* exists when the actor lacks the knowledge to perceive the threat, leaving them exposed without the agency to navigate it. A key refinement of the theory proposed by Mikkel Christoffersen (2018) is the introduction of *trust* and *distrust* as central factors shaping the relationship between the risk object and the object at risk. While classical risk theory assumes that individuals attempt to avoid or eliminate risk objects in order to distance themselves from potential harm (Boholm & Corvellec, 2011), Christoffersen (2018) argues that this outcome is not inevitable: when individuals trust a risk object, they maintain the relationship despite the lack of rational knowledge. Overall, the first approach to risk management is typical for institutionalised tourism while the second is a part of unconventional travelling.

In the context of hitchhiking and couchsurfing, trust functions as an important survival tool. It acts as a cognitive mechanism to navigate uncertainty: to bridge the gap between limited knowledge about the situation and the necessity of action, travelers rely on 'intuitive or pre-rational knowledge' (Zinn, 2008, p. 14). Importantly, trust itself remains inherently risky, as it can never be fully justified by evidence. Deliberate mistrust, by contrast, encourages attempts to control or exclude the source of risk and serves as an equally valid survival strategy. Hitchhikers and couchsurfers often choose to trust strangers, meaning they accept the uncertainty but assume that the other person will act in a cooperative way. This trust does not remove the risk; rather, it transforms the relationship:

- The risk object (stranger) is no longer treated purely as a threat, but as a potential host, helper, or social connection.
- The relationship shifts from one of exclusion (avoid strangers) to one of conditional inclusion (engage, but with awareness).
- Risk becomes something lived and negotiated, rather than simply avoided.

However, trust alone is not sufficient for managing risk and uncertainty within unconventional tourism. Both hitchhikers and couchsurfers must develop and apply verbal and visual communication skills in order to make decisions on the move and learn how to 'read' people. The nuances of these skills are discussed in the following section, while their role in value creation and risk management is explored in Section 2.4.

2.3. Skillset required for unconventional tourism

Since trust is needed to establish relationships within unconventional tourism, hitchhikers and couchsurfers have to develop the skillset that allows them to increase trustworthiness in drivers' or hosts' eyes. In this way, they try to look safe, friendly, and approachable which means they do work on their appearance which can be conceptualised through Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy and Hochschild's (1983) emotional work.

2.3.1. Frontstage acting and emotional work

In Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, social interaction is a form of performance: individuals present themselves in ways that produce desired impressions. Goffman calls this performative behaviour the *frontstage act*, where body language is carefully controlled to guide others' responses. Hitchhiking itself can be considered a frontstage performance: by choosing to stand on the road with the thumb up travellers signal what kind of activity they do. However, as Hochschild (1983) argues, Goffman mainly focuses on external display, which she calls *surface acting*, while overlooking the internal work required to sustain it. Therefore, Hochschild (1983) introduces the concept of *deep acting* – actively trying to change one's feelings so that they match what the situation demands. In other words, instead of just pretending to be calm or positive, individuals try to genuinely feel calm or positive. Applied to hitchhiking, surface acting appears in the form of a smile, showing friendliness and safety to potential drivers. At the same time, deep acting is a crucial skill when it comes to long waiting periods as travellers need to maintain a good mood despite hardships to be able to enjoy their travel.

According to Hochschild (1983), social situations are governed by feeling rules – shared expectations about what one should feel. When individuals' spontaneous emotions do not fit these rules, they engage in *emotional work* – actively shaping or evoking appropriate feelings. We use the concept of emotional work instead of more widely known emotional labour following the Hochschild's distinction between them, where emotional

labour is a wage-paid emotion management while management of emotions done privately is called emotional work. Even though in both hitchhiking and couchsurfing there is a transactional aspect, we still consider that the absence of monetary exchanges and private character of interactions are sufficient to conceptualise it as emotional work. Notably, emotional work in hitchhiking and couchsurfing serves as ‘immaterial’ currency to exchange personal skills of acting and communication for transportation and hospitality.

However, to get into someone’s house or car, an unconventional traveller has to appear in the right place at the right time – or write a request to the right person. This requires having a skill to navigate the physical and digital spaces based on one’s visual perception and finding hidden opportunities – mastering the art of looking for space’s affordances.

2.3.2. Mastering affordances

The concept of *affordances* introduced by James Gibson (1979) refers to the possibilities for actions offered by environments. Within this theory, spaces are not neutral, they shape what actions are possible and how interactions unfold (Molz, 2013), enabling or constraining what behaviour within certain places. Even though affordances objectively exist within the environment, the ability to read and utilise them is shaped by cultural norms, technologies, and practices. Building on this notion, Gaver (1991) introduces the concept of *hidden affordances* – those where the possibility for action exists but must be understood from other evidence. For example, for a driver on a highway, a gas station is a place for refueling, while a hitchhiker perceives the place as an opportunity to get or negotiate a lift.

While conventional environments offer affordances with obvious visual cues, unconventional travellers frequently have to navigate nothing but hidden affordances. What is more, hitchhikers and couchsurfers have to learn how to avoid *false affordances* – those which seem to exist but factually cannot be used (Gaver, 1991). This spatial competence is not an innate reflex; perceiving these cues requires what Ingold (2000) terms an *education of attention*. Through practical, hands-on learning and exposure to environmental friction, novices develop their perceptual skills to discover meanings hidden in the environment (Ingold, 2000). Thus, mastering unconventional travelling involves skilled *wayfinding* – an embodied, responsive performance of feeling one’s way through an environment by continually adjusting to perceptual cues (Ingold, 2000) which stands in direct contrast to the computational navigation of smart tourism.

Beyond physical space, couchsurfing – and to a lesser extent hitchhiking – relies on what Molz (2013) calls *moral affordances*: socially and technologically mediated possibilities for acting in ways that are considered right, trustworthy, and appropriate. In couchsurfing, moral affordances can be operationalised through profiles (presenting oneself as trustworthy), references (collective evaluation of behavior and reputation), and friendship links (trust by association). These affordances are embedded in a broader moral economy of alternative tourism, where non-commercial exchange, trust in strangers, and authentic social connections are valued over market-based interactions. These mechanisms make it possible to interact with strangers despite uncertainty, therefore, hitchhikers and couchsurfers need to learn how to recognise and use both spatial and moral affordances.

2.4. Experiential value creation in tourism

In this work, following the foundational Service-Dominant logic of Vargo and Lusch (2004), value is understood as value-in-use which precisely means that value is determined by the traveller as the beneficiary of the experience (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). According to Grönroos and Voima (2013), such value can be either created within the customer sphere or co-created within the joint sphere between service provider and beneficiary. Importantly, while immediate experiential value is co-created in the joint sphere, long-term outcomes, such as identity transformation or skills development are consolidated within the customer sphere (Andreades and Dimanche, 2024). Therefore, in the context of unconventional travelling, it is most precise to distinguish between value creation within the customer sphere and value-co-creation in the joint sphere (Grönroos and Voima, 2013). Since our study is intentionally centered on the traveller's perspective, we explicitly exclude the provider's independent value facilitation, focusing instead on how travellers accumulate value within their own sphere.

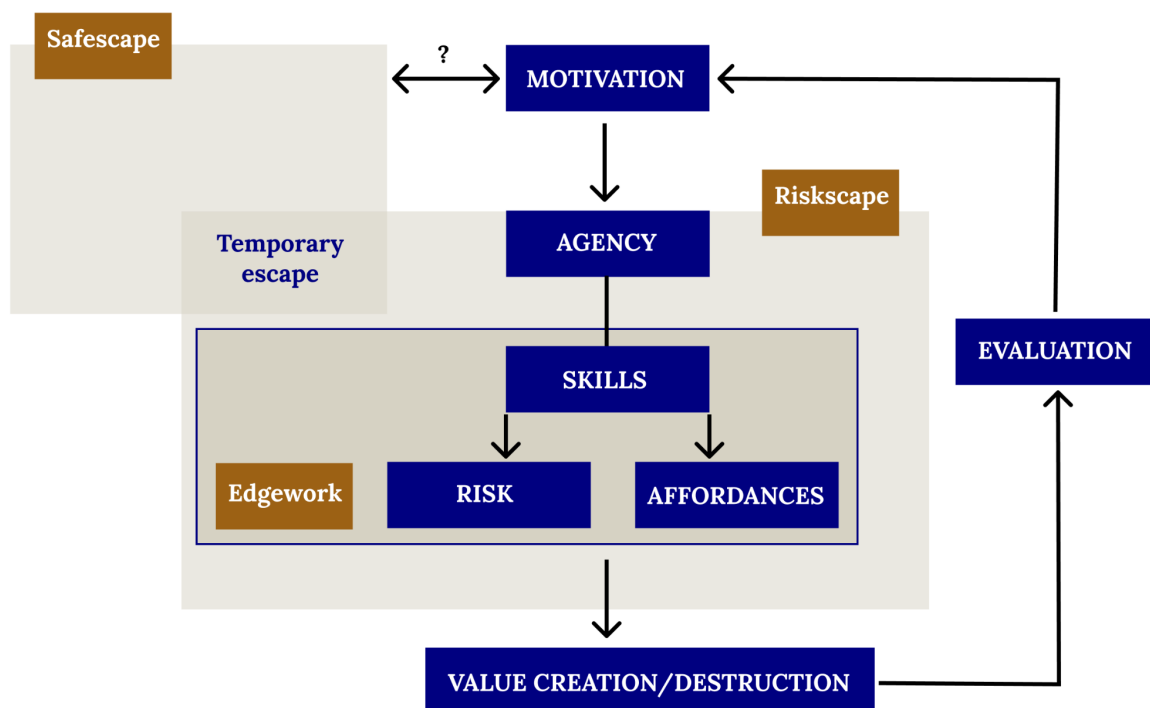
Importantly, the research sees tourists as ultimate creators of their own experiences (Björk, 2014). Within unconventional tourism, Prebensen (2014) concept of operand and operant resources highlights the importance of personal skills in the value creation process. Without operant ability to distinguish hidden affordances (Gaver, 1991) or activate frontstage acting (Goffman, 1959) and emotional work skills (Hochschild, 1983), operand resources, such as gas stations or vacant rooms, cannot be successfully utilised. Accordingly, active participation in value creation enhances overall well-being, specifically self-development and life-fulfillment in a form of social, emotional, and spiritual growth

(Björk, 2014) Notably, in the tourism context, the alignment of personal values with the experience is crucial in this process (Andreades and Dimanche, 2024). This positionality supports the role of motivations as a catalyst to seek value creation: repeated participation in activities generates experiential learning, through which previously realised values generate motivations for future journeys. (Chen, Prebensen, & Uysal, 2014). However, as Echeverri and Skålén (2011) argue that interactive value formation is “not only a creative process but also a destructive one,” we also evaluate the process of value destruction in unconventional tourism.

3. Theoretical framework

Synthesising the literature on risk and value creation in unconventional tourism, this framework draws primarily on edgework theory while extending it towards travellers' interaction with space, uncertainty, and social relations. The model conceptualises the traveller's journey as a process that begins with Motivation (M) to enter the riskscape, where Agency (A) functions as a necessary prerequisite for making this decision. As operation within the riskscape can be conceptualised through edgework, the traveller has to use Skill (S) for successful performance: in the context of hitchhiking and couchsurfing, this includes searching for affordances, employing different forms of acting, and navigating Risks (R). Ultimately, this journey through the riskscape leads to particular forms of Value (V) that can be either positive – when value creation occurs – or negative, in cases of value destruction. As a result, depending on the value derived through the process of experience evaluation, the traveller can decide upon the next journey: whether to re-enter the riskscape or choose the safescape. By mapping this process, the framework identifies the mechanisms that shape immersion and engagement in unconventional tourism, contrasting two modes of travel: the predictable safescape and the uncertain riskscape.

Figure 1. M→ARS→V framework for the analysis of value creation in unconventional tourism



The safescape is characterised by predictability, minimised risks, and a stronger influence of the 'generalised other' in decision-making. In contrast, the riskscape is defined by uncertainty, constant exposure to risk, and the dominance of the active I in decision-making. Entering the riskscape therefore requires travellers to deliberately step outside conventional systems of safety and predictability.

The transition from safescape to riskscape begins with motivation. Travellers may choose unconventional mobility for practical reasons, such as reducing travel costs, or for experiential reasons, including adventure, emotional intensity, spontaneity, or the desire for authentic social interaction. However, motivation alone is insufficient. Entry into the riskscape requires agency: a conscious decision to accept uncertainty, take responsibility for one's own safety, and actively engage with the environment. This marks the beginning of edgework, because travellers can no longer remain passive consumers of organised tourism systems and instead become active navigators of risk, uncertainty, and social interaction.

Within the riskscape, successful navigation depends on the application of skills. In this framework, skills are understood not only as practical competencies, but also as the ability to perceive, interpret, and utilise affordances – opportunities for action that emerge through the relationship between the traveller and the environment. At the same time, travellers must continuously evaluate risks. Risks emerge from both environmental and interpersonal factors, including weather conditions, exhaustion, social misunderstandings, legal issues, dangerous encounters, or failures of trust. The relationship between affordances and risks is central to the framework: the same environment that creates opportunities for movement and interaction also contains the potential for value destruction. Consequently, travellers must constantly negotiate between opportunity and danger.

The outcome of edgework depends on whether travellers manage to navigate these edges without overstepping them. When edgework is successfully performed, it can generate value creation. When edgework is successfully navigated, the resulting value creation shifts motivation towards intrinsic and other-oriented dimensions. During the evaluative phase, this acquired experiential value loops back and changes the traveller's baseline motivation. However, when the edge is overstepped, value destruction may occur instead. Importantly, value creation and value destruction are not strictly oppositional outcomes and may coexist within the same experience.

Finally, the framework includes a process of evaluation. After navigating the riskscape, travellers reflect upon the value outcomes of their experiences and decide whether they wish to re-enter the riskscape or return to the safescape. Positive outcomes such as social bonding, emotional intensity, or personal growth may motivate repeated participation in unconventional travel practices, while negative experiences may encourage travellers to seek more predictable forms of mobility. Nevertheless, skill development remains a persistent outcome regardless of whether the overall experience is perceived positively or negatively, since repeated exposure to uncertainty continuously shapes travellers' competencies, strategies, and understanding of the environment.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology and a social constructionist ontology. Interpretivism was selected over positivist approaches because our central aim is to understand the subjective motives, meaning-making processes, and interactional dynamics of the travellers themselves (Flick, 2022). From a constructionist standpoint, we treat social reality as continuously produced and reproduced through social interaction, existing in a constant state of revision (Clark et al., 2021, Chapter 2): the value and risks associated with hitchhiking and couchsurfing are not inherent but constructed within relational, spatial, and contextual settings where they are experienced (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We opted for a qualitative methodology (Flick, 2022) because answering our research questions requires deep analysis of individual motivations, perspectives, and meaning-making. Therefore, narrative- and experience-driven data is essential to capture lived realities of spatial friction and identity negotiation – which cannot be processed within the quantitative approach.

Our primary theoretical orientation is rooted in symbolic Interactionism, specifically utilising Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework. This orientation posits that individuals navigate risk and construct meaning through continuous, performative social interactions, therefore, this lens is helpful in answering our research question about value creation and destruction in unconventional travelling. Moreover, symbolic interactionism provides the precise methodological justification for our two-step data collection: in-depth semi-structured interviews allow us to capture the articulated, 'frontstage' meanings participants assign to risk and trust, while ethnography allows us to observe how those meanings are actively modified, negotiated, and occasionally fractured through real-time physical interaction and 'backstage' realities within the environment.

Overall, the research process followed an abductive logic – we approached this study from opposite sides: Elizaveta had hitchhiking and couchsurfing experience while for Simas theory was the point of entry into the topic – most notably Goffman's dramaturgical theory and Lyng's concept of edgework. During the research process, we reflexively moved

between theory and empirics – ‘fused our horizons’, relying on pre-existing empirical knowledge and sensitising concepts which provided a general sense of reference and suggesting directions for enquiry (Blumer, 1970, as cited in Flick, 2022, Chapter 25). Abductive logic allowed us to use theories as analytical lenses, while maintaining the flexibility to let the raw data challenge existing frameworks and identify ‘changed circumstances, additional dimensions, or misguided preconceptions’ (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was chosen to effectively map patterned meanings and shared subcultural mechanics across our diverse dataset. Such a reflexive approach with acknowledging possible biases of us as researchers while working with data and subjectivity of both our and interviewees’ experience was supposed to increase the validity of our research.

4.2. Data collection

The data collection process for this research consisted of two consecutive phases. First, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in hitchhiking and couchsurfing in order to collect retrospective narratives and develop an ‘outside’ perspective on unconventional travelling. While this phase allowed participants to articulate their thoughts regarding risk and value, retrospective accounts are inherently subject to memory bias; discrepancies often arise from ‘inaccurate memories, especially when respondents report the attitudes or behaviour a long time after the event’ (Clark et al., 2021, Chapter 12).

Therefore, the second phase was methodologically necessary to achieve data triangulation. As Flick (2022, Chapter 13) notes, while interviews capture subjective, retrospective knowledge, ‘observation rather focuses on practices and interactions at a specific moment and thus adds a new perspective’. An auto-ethnographic field trip followed interview analysis to give us the opportunity to gather or refresh personal experiences of hitchhiking and couchsurfing. Importantly, the second phase was designed not merely to document personal experience, but to leverage empirical field data to ‘gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena’ (Anderson, 2006).

4.2.1. Semi-structured interviews

Since our research questions concerned personal experiences and subcultural attitudes rather than broad statistical generalisations, we utilised purposive and

network-driven sampling. Our target group encompassed individuals who had experienced both hitchhiking and couchsurfing in several trips, preferably, recently or on a regular basis. We also included individuals who may have had fewer couchsurfing nights or kilometres hitchhiked if they were deeply involved in another dimension of unconventional travelling. This allowed us to investigate the participants' primary modes of spatial interaction and develop a holistic conceptualisation of the phenomenon, deliberately selecting individuals who 'best fit' the predefined characteristics of our study (Clark et al., 2021, Chapter 8).

Initially, Elizaveta reached out to her network from travel communities she socialised in, hitchhiking partners and fellow travellers, as well as couchsurfing contacts. In addition to the primary network, we expanded the sample using social media platforms:

- **LinkedIn:** Posting a call for respondents with the description of our topic.
- **Instagram:** Searching for users and content utilising tags or profile keywords such as 'hitchhiker', 'hitch', and 'nomad'.
- **Reddit:** Creating thematic discussion threads in subreddits r/hitchhiking and r/vagabond centered around questions of digital connectivity and perceived danger.

Recognising the subjective nature of interpretivist research and the absence of ambitions to generalise our findings, we consciously rejected the positivist concept of 'data saturation', which Braun and Clarke (2021) argue is epistemologically incompatible with reflexive thematic analysis. Instead, the sample size of 14 interviews was deemed methodologically sufficient as we could already notice recurring patterns in interviewees' answers and outline possible answers to our research questions. Further interview collection might have added minor nuances to our dataset but within limited time it was more beneficial for the research that we did thorough triangulation via ethnography instead. This provided the analytical depth required to address our research questions without necessitating further recruitment.

Table 1. Participant overview

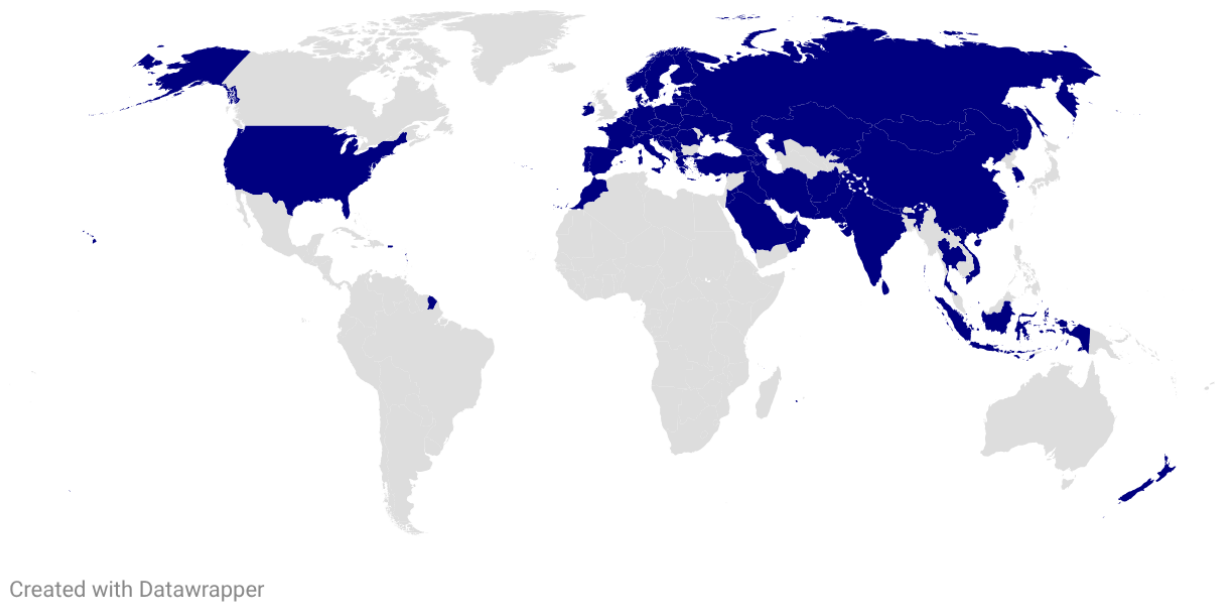
Pseudonim	Grew up in	Recorded on	Recording length	Gender	Age	Occupation
Alina	Russia	20.02.2026	0:57:16	Female	23	Transport Planner
Lena	Russia	20.02.2026	0:52:25	Female	25	Architect
Karl	USA	23.02.2026	1:02:17	Male	39	Writer
Alice & Tara	Denmark	23.02.2026	0:57:41	Female	24, 25	Social worker / Farm worker

Onur	Türkiye	27.02.2026	1:03:51	Male	34	Business Development Executive
Anton	Russia	01.03.2026	0:51:46	Male	25	Software Developer
Lidia	Russia	01.03.2026	1:08:11	Female	24	Student
Viktor	Russia	04.03.2026	1:00:23	Male	38	Software Developer
Liam	Germany	04.03.2026	0:50:11	Male	25	Traveller
Eric	USA	05.03.2026	0:59:03	Male	47	Software Developer
Alexey	Russia	05.03.2026	1:03:39	Male	28	Software Developer
Joel	Sweden	11.03.2026	0:57:52	Male	30	Business Systems Analyst (on study leave)
Feliz	Türkiye	28.03.2026	1:19:10	Female	31	Researcher
Esra	Austria	06.04.2024	1:41:02	Female	28	Geologist

Critically evaluating the composition of this sample, we acknowledge that there is a clear access bias regarding the high proportion of participants with a Russian cultural background – a direct consequence of Elizaveta’s emic network. As Flick (2022, Chapter 11) notes, a researcher’s location on the spectrum between strangeness and familiarity inevitably determines ‘which part of the field under study will be accessible and inaccessible’.

Secondly, the sample represents mostly white-collar tech-oriented workers from Western counties engaging in unconventional travelling on sabbaticals and work-breaks. By focusing on this population, the research design allows us to investigate how individuals with rather materially comfortable backgrounds utilise unconventional travel to introduce friction into their routines. From a post-colonial perspective, the deliberate manufacturing of friction is a privilege often reserved for those whose baseline existence is secure. Within the new mobilities paradigm, control over movement is a resource with unequal access and while some move for status and power, others’ are being forcefully displaced (Sheller & Urry, 2006). As a result, the bias of our interview sample creates the context shaping phenomenon observed and outlining demographic and geographic categories our findings are applicable to. Since naturalistic inquiry does not seek universal external validity, our goal is to provide the ‘thick description’ of data and process to make it possible to assess how these findings apply to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316).

Figure 2. *Countries where our interviewees practised unconventional travelling*



Ten interviews were conducted in English with both native and non-native speakers and four interviews were held in Russian when participants were not comfortable speaking English. Such an approach employing native languages allowed for deeper, nuanced discussion. Since the participants were scattered across the globe, all interviews were conducted through Zoom and recorded with informed consent. To guarantee transparency and capture the consent, a two-step process was utilised: firstly, participants were informed off-record about the ethics protocol and when informal agreement was given, we started the recording. Before asking questions, we informed interviewees about the length of the conversation, confidential character of data processing, and explained our research purpose, emphasising the volunteer character of participation and ensuring they were fully aware of their right to skip questions, stop the conversation or withdraw their data at any stage for any reason (Clark et al., 2021, Chapter 6).

As interviews were conducted via Zoom, participation required digital literacy and internet access. As Flick (2022, Chapter 15) notes, digitally mediated communication is ‘limited to people ready and willing to use’ such technology, which can simulate real-world interaction while potentially losing the ‘spontaneity of verbal exchange’ and vital paralinguistic elements.

The interview guide (see Appendix A) was structurally underpinned by our initial sensitising framework with the aim to cover all aspects of the model: motivations, agency, affordances, risk, skills, and value (see Appendix B). However, to gain authentic narratives rather than intellectualised responses, we formulated questions in a way allowing

participants to reflect upon their lived stories, behaviours, values, motivations, identity negotiations, and spatial affordances. As Hermanns (1995, as cited in Flick, 2022, Chapter 17) observes, deep experiential knowledge is often ‘available to informants at the level of narrative presentation but not at the level of theories’. This indirect approach allowed us to organically capture the social dimensions and meanings behind their actions. While interviewing, we could deviate from the interview guide by changing the order of questions, adding follow-ups or omitting some questions when it allowed us to dive deeper in the most resonating aspects of travelling for each person.

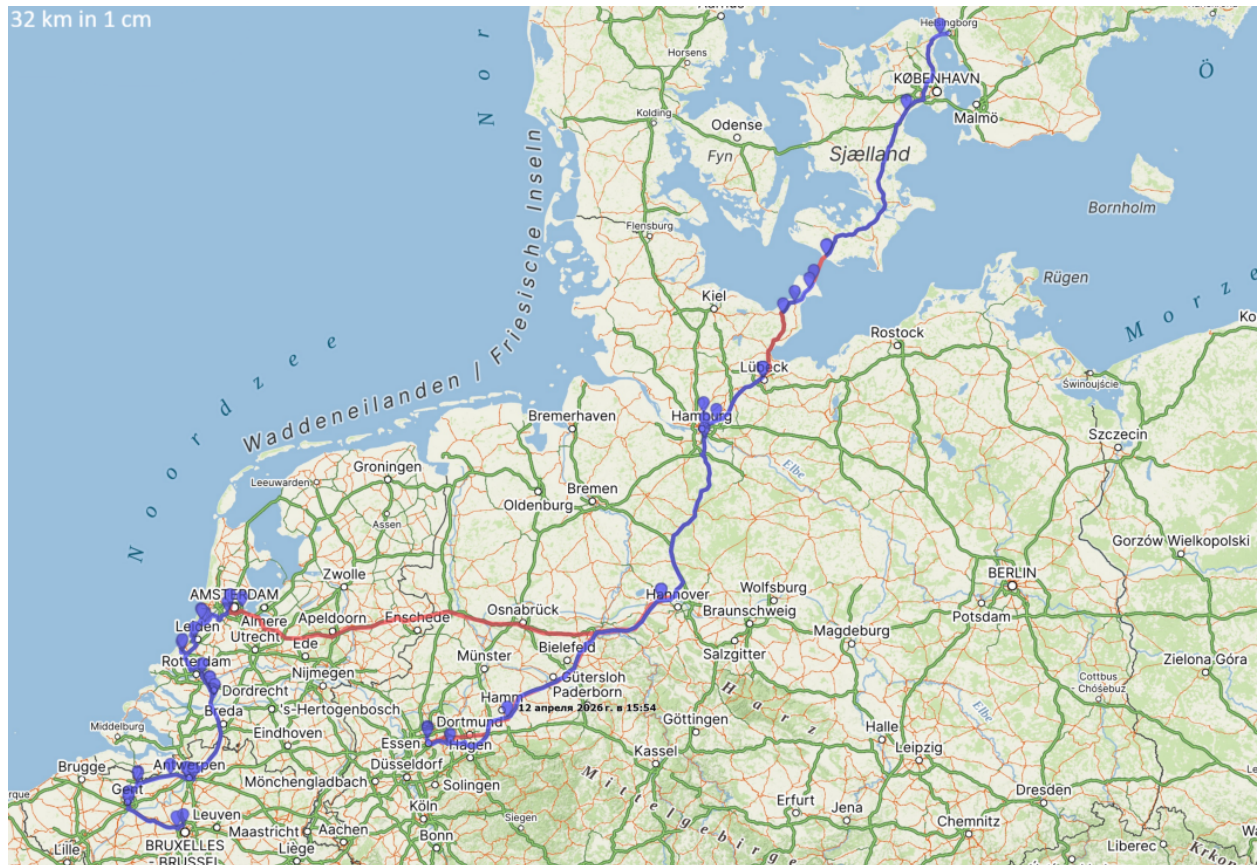
4.2.2. Auto-ethnography

By engaging directly with the field, ethnography makes it possible to generate rich, context-sensitive insights into both the practices and experiences of hitchhiking (Alvehus, 2024), thereby providing a holistic understanding of value creation and engagement that is central to this thesis. To observe interactions within unconventional travelling without any intermediaries, immerse ourselves in the context and understand meanings from the inside, we completed a 10-days field auto-ethnography. From 9th to 19th of April, 2026 we hitchhiked through Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium and came back to Sweden by bus. Detailed itinerary can be seen below.

Table 2. *The itinerary*

Date	Route	km hitchhiked	Nº
09.04	Helsingborg – Helsingør – Rødbyhavn – Puttgarden – Lübek	236 km	5 rides
10.04	Lübek – Hamburg	50 km	1 ride
11.04	Hamburg	-	
12.04	Hamburg – Bohum	373 km	4 rides
13.04	Bohum – Essen – Hannover – Amsterdam	-	
14.04	Amsterdam	-	
15.04	Amsterdam	-	
16.04	Amsterdam – the Hague – Dordrecht	174 km	5 rides
17.04	Dordrecht – Antwerpen – Gent	141 km	4 rides
18.04	Gent – Brussel	50 km	2 rides
19.04	Brussel – Helsingborg	-	
	4 countries	1024 km	21 rides

Figure 3. *The field trip route*



We chose those countries because of their geographical and cultural proximity, allowing us to make a seamless overland journey and avoid exoticization of local cultures or cultural shock, while helping to focus on the research process and points of interest as well as maintain optimal level of friction. Moreover, such geography supported deeper analysis of hitchhiking in mentioned countries facilitating more focused results.

We acknowledge that our appearance may have influenced how drivers perceived us on the road. As Eastern Europeans in our mid-20s and mid-30s with relatively conventional appearances (Picture 1), we were generally able to blend in visually with local populations and, apparently, did not encounter the kinds of prejudice that travellers from different racial or ethnic backgrounds, or those with more explicitly countercultural appearances, might experience.

Pictures 1-3. *How drivers saw us on the road*



During the trip, we aimed not to use any 'conventional' means of accommodation either, maximising engagement in the Couchsurfing community when possible. As a result, out of nine nights on the trip we spent:

- three nights with Couchsurfing hosts,
- three nights with friends,
- one with a friend's friend whom we saw the first time in our life,
- one in a flixbus, and
- one in a tent.

Technically, we could avoid the bus ride from Essen to Amsterdam but that would mean another night in a tent with more friction and less action. The first night in the tent could also, probably, be avoided and we could have stayed with a Couchsurfing host but the sequence of our actions prevented us from this (see hitchhiking spots and waiting time in Appendix C).

During 10 days of fieldwork across Northern and Western Europe, we operated as participant observers, focusing on our own reactions to friction of unconventional travelling and interactions with drivers, hosts, and each other. To ensure data recording reliability, we documented our trip with photos, videos and notes made on the go with the help of our mobile phones. All hitchhiking spots used, accommodations lived in, and attractions visited were mapped, including coordinates and time stamps. This immediacy served as a necessary ethnographic safeguard against "the pitfalls attending recall and the all-too-easy blurring of fact and fancy" (Strauss et al., 1964, as cited in Flick, 2022., Chapter 19).

To facilitate future analysis, at the conclusion of each day, we conducted a structured debriefing session to record our observations across three dimensions:

- **The Self:** Our own embodied psychological and physical responses to friction and uncertainty.
- **The Structure:** The spatial affordances of the road, the architecture of the environment, and the mediating power of digital infrastructure.
- **The Subcultural Dynamic:** The real-time knowledge-transfer dynamic between the insider (Elizaveta) and the outsider (Simas).

While 10 days is a short timeframe compared to traditional longitudinal ethnography, it aligns with the principles of focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005) and mobile ethnography (Sheller & Urry, 2006), which prioritise the intensity of transient friction and spatial negotiation over long-term community integration perfectly fitting the

study of unconventional tourism. Crucially, the second phase of the research was not designed as an ethnography of the hitchhiking subculture as a whole; rather, it functioned strictly as an ethnography of the practice environment and the researcher experience, utilised explicitly for theoretical triangulation. Practically, this trip length also aligns with the possible duration of a hitchhiking trip made for personal purposes, increasing the authenticity of our experience.

4.3. Data analysis

The transcription and translation of the audio-recorded interviews were conducted entirely offline utilising the Whisper language model, executed locally via Python script on non-networked hardware. The analytical coding phase was executed locally using NVivo software, ensuring no data exposure to third parties or the Internet.

The empirical material was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This approach was chosen because it allows for identification of patterned meanings across the dataset while remaining compatible with interpretivist and constructionist assumptions. The analysis followed an abductive logic characterised by a continuous dialogue between the empirical material and our theoretical framework. We systematically analysed the data following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis.

1. **Familiarisation:** Both researchers independently read and re-read the transcripts and field notes, generating initial observational memos. Simas utilised the literature as primary deductive lenses, while Elizaveta prioritised the inductive grounding in the raw transcripts.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** We engaged in a rigorous, line-by-line coding process, generating a rich corpus of initial open codes. In strict accordance with reflexive thematic analysis principles, we explicitly rejected positivist metrics like 'intercoder reliability'. Because coding quality in this paradigm stems 'not from consensus between coders, but from depth of engagement with the data, and situated, reflexive interpretation' (Braun & Clarke, 2021), coding discrepancies were treated as opportunities for dialogical meaning-making and collaborative reflexivity. Through analytic conversations and peer debriefing, these differences deepened our theoretical understanding until conceptual coherence was reached.

3. **Searching for Themes:** Using Miro.com for visual mapping, related codes were clustered into broader subcategories.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** These subcategories were abductively tested against our sensitising concepts (e.g., Goffman, Lyng) to ensure they accurately reflected both the data and the theoretical trajectory.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** We abstracted these subcategories into our final conceptual architecture. Aligning strictly with the method's theoretical foundations, we ensured each final theme functioned as a 'pattern of shared meaning, organised around a core concept or idea' (Braun et al., 2019).
6. **Producing the Report:** The final narrative was structured around these defined themes.

Theory allowed us to approach interviewing with armed eyes and be more precise asking questions about uncertainty, motivations or identity work, while leaving room for surprise when coding allowed us to derive several categories based on raw data. This iterative movement enabled deeper conceptualisation of how value is created within unconventional travelling contexts.

4.4. Ethics

Even though we did not consider participation in hitchhiking and couchsurfing as sensitive topics requiring additional ethical commission approval, we were committed not to harm interviewees and strangers while doing research (Flick, 2022). Since certain questions could arouse recalling of distressing experiences, such as sexual harassment or direct physical risks, we prioritised participant well-being and did not push them elaborate beyond their comfort level.

To avoid covert human subject research, which violates the principles of informed consent and poses risks to invade privacy (Clark et al., 2021, Chapter 6), our analytical gaze was turned inward. We focused on our own feelings during interaction with drivers and hosts rather than on the details of their personal life, allowing drivers to stay anonymous and affected by our research as minimally as possible. Moreover, we warned all drivers immediately that we were doing research on hitchhiking, allowing them to choose the topics themselves and decide not to share overly sensitive information. In the couchsurfing context, we mentioned doing research on couchsurfing in our requests which allowed hosts to reject these requests if they were uncomfortable with accommodating us as

researchers. In terms of the 'no harm' principle, we believe that our interactions with drivers and hosts were unlikely to have caused negative consequences. Given the power dynamics within the car and someone's home, which generally favour drivers and hosts, as well as the communication style typical for unconventional travellers, our presence and engagement in their spaces were necessarily cautious and accommodating. By focusing exclusively on the researchers' internal, affective responses to the space, we ensured our methodology remained an autoethnographic analysis that 'draws upon our personal experiences and perceptions to inform our broader social understandings' (Anderson, 2006), rather than extracting unauthorised ethnographic data on the hosts themselves.

Actual physical risk was mitigated by traveling exclusively as a duo, maintaining emergency financial reserves and active travel insurance, while ensuring continuous location-sharing with a designated third party. If directly asked about our academic pursuits by a driver or host, we committed to full transparency regarding our research.

5. Analysis

5.1 Risks and uncertainty amplifying the experience

The data collected within this study suggests that with experience unconventional travellers master strategies of risk mitigation (Dayour et al., 2019). Importantly, hitchhikers and couchsurfers take into account and prepare themselves for a noticeably bigger scope of risks compared to those they might face on a daily basis. Thus, risk mitigation seems to become the condition on what travellers enter the uncertain riskscape, however, it is mainly uncertainty and unpredictability that they see as a factor spicing up the experience.

5.1.1. How risks are perceived and mitigated

During our field work, abstract risks circulating in the talks about hitchhiking, were not perceived as significant neither by Simas nor by Elizaveta: there were no situation where we would have felt threat from a driver or any stranger either being outside or at someone's place during the day or very late at night. Interviewees also emphasise that risks associated with hitchhiking and couchsurfing are often exaggerated in dominant cultural narratives, suggesting a gap between perceived and experienced risk. Joel describes his attitude the following way:

I treat hitchhiking as, you know, I don't feel it's a dangerous activity. I'd say, maybe the risk isn't as great as you imagine it to be. I'd say the most dangerous thing with hitchhiking is being inside of a car because statistically it's a much higher risk that the person driving the car will crash the car and will die because of that, not because of like some imagined danger from the activity of hitchhiking.

Interestingly, in certain circumstances, couchsurfing could seem to be safer than traditional accommodation options: *for me it felt so much more comfortable and safe to read the reviews of couchsurfing hosts than just show up at any hotel and then stay there*, tells Esra.

Other participants, when discussing risks of hitchhiking, mention driving-related risks in the first place: *night hitchhiking is more risky, because you can meet a strange driver who drives drunk, for example, or you can get into a situation when you need to drive yourself*, explains Alina who had experienced both situations. Nevertheless, hitchhikers

whom we interviewed seem to stay vigilant and critically assess potential drivers: *Probably the saddest thing you can do is to get in the wrong car – in all senses – if it goes the wrong way, or if the person inside is not kind to you. There are a lot of such odious personalities, and you don't know what to do, whether to have fun with them or they will stab you with a knife in the back*, tells Viktor.

Odd people

Counter measures and strategies of risk mitigation against 'odd' people vary among interviewed hitchhikers: some of them have pepper spray, some have tactics of entering the car and positioning inside. We used location tracking and keeping valuable belongings in concealed pockets close to the body. However, acknowledging reasonable precautions, some participants prefer assumption-based risk mitigation, for example, Viktor sees radical positivity as a protection means: *a positive attitude towards those around, wish them all the best, as they wish you. Because, if you think that the whole world is negative towards you, inevitably negative things will be attracted to you. But if you are sure that the universe is abundant, then it will be.*

Risk assessment reported by our interviewees is primarily intuitive, based on emotional perception and social signals that travellers use to interpret drivers during interaction (Christoffersen, 2018). That's how Joel describes the process:

In hitchhiking a lot is about intuition <...> I mean, when someone stops, I go with my gut feeling but I don't do anything special to minimise the danger of hitchhiking. And I mean, a lot of people tell me this as well.

Alina agrees that intuition can help to spot people with ambiguous intentions:

When a person is straightforward, when they have no inner doubts about what they offer you, you can always feel it. People with bad intentions tend to be a bit cowardly.

For many participants communication served as a risk mitigation strategy. For example, Esra and Feliz noted that they try to make initial communication as long as possible to make sure a driver is reliable enough, while all interviewees mentioned this first contact as crucial in risk-assessment. When in the car, travellers use non-confrontation in a dialogue as a risk mitigation strategy which seems to be a recurring pattern within our dataset. Travellers tend to avoid confrontation, remain open to others' perspectives, and use questioning rather than argumentation when dialogues become ambiguous or contradictory to their values. Importantly, this communicative style reflects asymmetrical

power relations, particularly between driver and hitchhiker or host and guest and travellers are aware of this imbalance (Reichenberger, 2017).

At the same time, visual assessment can also be used as an additional risk assessment strategy. As Viktor notes:

Probably one of the signs that is not 100% accurate but in general works as the red or green flag is the neatness of the car interior and the person himself. From my experience, I can draw the conclusion that what's inside the car is in the mind.

Besides general untrustworthiness, visual assessment helps hitchhikers to exclude more obvious and direct risks from drivers, such as substances or alcohol abuse:

Sketchy folks, there's a sign of alcohol in the car. If I get a twitchy or methamphetamine vibe, those are folks probably not good to hang out with and just say, oh, sorry, man, I need to go a little bit farther. I'm not going that way. But not that often, surprisingly, Eric describes the experience of hitchhiking in the USA.

Where available, formal mechanisms supplement the intuition: interviewees mentioned that they read references of potential hosts and guests while making decisions on Couchsurfing. Request messages are also crucial to evaluate whether to host or not someone. However, even these systems are used not only for safety but also to evaluate the potential value outcome of social interaction. In situations with limited options, travellers engage in situational trade-offs, negotiating between safety, comfort, and the desire for connection – for example, sending requests to less relevant hosts not to sleep outside: *if you're in a small town, don't really know if you're going to get an answer at all. So you can't be super picky*, explains Joel.

Gendered risks

At the same time, the gender aspect has a significant influence on risks and risk perception among hitchhikers and couchsurfers (Laurendeau, 2008). Male travellers express confidence in their own safety based on gender only: *I'm male, so something unsafe shouldn't happen with me statistically. It never happened*, says Alexey. In practice, however, the assumption turns out to be false: one of the drivers whom we met during the field trip told us a story about how he got robbed while hitchhiking himself. Moreover, even the 'guarantee' of sexual safety for male travellers is illusory. As Joel tells,

The only bad – uncomfortable – experience I've had was in the US when I was hitchhiking in Utah with this guy I met at the gas station. And then we drove like 10 meters and he asked me if I could give him a blowjob for some cash. I was like, 'No, no, thank you', and then he said, 'Okay', and stopped. And I got out. That was, of course, a bit uncomfortable. But I didn't really get a threatening atmosphere from him, you know.

According to relational theory of risk, such encounters can indicate that the trust used as a risk coping factor under conditions of uncertainty was not an optimal strategy and shift traveller's behaviour to more risk-averse one. Moreover, such encounters have a potential for value destruction (Echeverri & Skålen, 2011) since they ruin fragile interpersonal connections between travellers and drivers or hosts that often serve as a central motivation to engage in unconventional travelling.

However, for female travellers protecting themselves from unwanted sexual attention appears to be an all-pervasive concern. In one way or another, all female interviewees mentioned certain precautions done: deliberately 'anti-sexualising' clothing, avoiding the front seat when hitchhiking, not sending couchsurfing requests to single male hosts, having alarm devices – or simply travelling with male companions in certain regions.

This summer I tried to hitchhike in a very bright yellow dress. And that dress I took with me on purpose because, first, it's very long and very yellow. So I'm visible from a distance. Secondly, it identified me as a girl very easily. And by having that on me, I tried to signal the drivers that "Okay, I'm a girl, I'm not gonna kill you. I'm safe." And thirdly, I tried to evaluate my look in this dress with a backpack, with sneakers. I hope that I looked a little bit crazy at the same time because the least what I want to look is being sexy when I'm on the road, tells Lidia.

The reason is that women, apparently, are more frequently exposed to sexual offers. Alina shares:

I had cases when drivers were cringy – and a couple of cases when drivers offered random sex. Like they asked, 'what's your attitude to...' I say, man, no, thank you, I have a boyfriend in [homecity]. When I had one I said it, when I was single, I just said that I was not interested in this.

Luckily, none of our interviewees reported any kind of violence towards them, though we would not state that such accidents cannot happen while travelling unconventionally.

Importantly, hitchhiking reveals a relational character of gendered safety perception. From the traveller's perspective, the practice is generally more dangerous for women than for men. At the same time, cautious drivers prefer to pick up female hitchhikers, as they seem to be safer than males. Using relational theory of risk (Boholm & Corvellec, 2011), this can be explained as follows: for drivers, the hitchhiker may constitute a risk object, while the drivers themselves are objects at risk. Consequently, drivers often prefer passengers perceived as less threatening, such as women or mixed-gender pairs. For hitchhikers, by contrast, the driver may become the risk object, while they themselves occupy the position of the object at risk; in this context, male presence may function as a form of safety guarantee that reduces perceived vulnerability.

During our ethnographic trip, two female drivers explicitly told us that they stopped only because Elizaveta was present in our pair and that they would not have stopped for a lone male hitchhiker. Overall, through conversations with drivers and reflections on our own experiences of gendered safety, we came to the conclusion that female-male hitchhiking pairs tend to raise the fewest concerns from both the driver's and the hitchhiker's perspectives. Therefore, the speed and easiness of hitchhiking is gender-affected too. Alina explains:

I actually have an androgynous appearance on the road, and I am constantly confused with the boy. And it seems to me that there are no disadvantages in that. From a safety point of view, I feel much more comfortable, realising that the driver perceives me as a person, not like 'oh, there's a girl on the road'. On the other hand, there is probably a disadvantage, because the speed of movement of a feminine girl is obviously higher than that of an androgynous girl, and especially of a boy. And even more so for two boys.

Same as hitchhiking, couchsurfing is not free from sexual risks. Interviewees mentioned that *there are people that are looking for someone to sleep with and so forth*. For this reason, some female couchsurfers prefer to be hosted and host only travellers of the same gender — or seek shelter after bad encounters. As Onur describes, several times he got urgent requests from female couchsurfers faced harassment or bad experiences at the previous place.

Environment

At the same time, since unconventional travellers do not rely on tourist infrastructure, their journeys become much more physically demanding: *In Spain, once I*

stood [*hitchhiked on the spot*] for one and a half days. The temperature was 36°C in the shade, and I was standing right under the blazing sun. I was ready to give any money there, that is how Viktor recalls one of the challenging experiences. Bad weather conditions while being on the road, exhaustion after the long day of hitchhiking and sleeping in places not designed for that — all of these is a reality of an unconventional traveller. As a result, hitchhikers risk facing fatigue or emotional burnout if they do not manage environmental conditions well. That is the reason why temporary withdrawal from non-market ways of travelling can be considered as a coping strategy among unconventional travellers. Joel describes one of such situations:

Most of the time, I think we slept outside and stuff. And we didn't have, we had like a sleeping bag, we didn't have any tents or anything. We just slept outside. And so we were all super, super tired at the end of it. And then we got together and booked the hotel room together. Like just one hotel room where we four could sleep, you know. And everyone didn't fit into the bed. But I think I slept on the floor. But it was still super, super nice because it was warm. And yeah, I think we slept like from check-in until like we could check out. So sometimes you just need to have a rest as well.

According to relational theory of risk (Boholm & Corvellec, 2011), such behaviour represents a shift from engagement in risk to risk-averse approach. Since both strategies are equally valid risk-mitigation practices, choosing the best one in each individual situation showcases the agency of travellers in decision-making. Alina talks about having the 'backup' options in a following way:

I never found myself in a situation where I had no money to eat at the gas station and don't plan to find myself in such a situation ever. I mean as a rule I have money for a ticket to [homecity] from any city I pass through. Crucial not to be in a hopeless situation.

Importantly, enduring hardships while travelling in a non-market based way has another — more positive — side. Interviewees note that when they manage to overcome challenges, they tend to evaluate such situations as positive experiences: *It all brings pleasure. Just one night and you have a story for the whole life. Some memories that you have fun retelling somewhere*, explains Viktor.

Overall, in unconventional travelling, risk becomes not an abstract possibility to get robbed or harassed by a driver or host but a very practical encounter, for example, with the police if having to hitchhike on a highway, incidentally pitching a tent where it is prohibited

or invading private territory by mistake. Additionally, very mundane body-related risks to get exhausted, sick or just wet and hungry are always present. Given the experience from the field trip, we can suppose that among these two the second group of risks tend to be considered more important due to being literally closer to the body. At the same time the specific skillset to manage one's own performance near the edge and not face the consequences is what is needed for success (Lyng, 2008).

5.1.2. Mechanics and dimensions of the edgework

Within the unconventional travelling edgework skillset to navigate the riskscape and not overstep the edge includes spatial and personal dimension: reading affordances, and emotional work.

Affordances

During the field trip every day we found ourselves in situations requiring reading hidden affordances, sometimes located in the 'grey zone', therefore, demanding additional persistence and experience to be used (Gaver, 1991; Gibson 1979). The most common practical needs encountered during travel involved access to drinking water and toilet facilities. Since tap water is generally drinkable within the EU, we frequently refilled bottles in the toilets of cafés and petrol stations while on the move. When access was restricted through payment requirements, we instead asked staff members to refill bottles in kitchen areas and did not encounter refusals. Importantly, instability – or uncertainty – is a factor that intensifies the necessity to find affordances. When it is not known when and where drinking water or toilet would be available, the environment motivates a traveller to use the opportunity when it emerges (Gibson, 1979).

Such 'survival mode' skills of maintaining yourself on the road or in the city without using paid options come with practice (Ingold, 2000). Only then gas or train stations become 'safety islands' while service or rest areas, bus stops and ramps – spots where the space can be 'hacked'. Thus, participation in hitchhiking or similar practices presupposes a form of embodied knowledge and situational awareness. During the ethnography period of this study, we compared our adaptability to the environment and affordances utilisation and noted that for Elizaveza care about physical well-being took less effort than for Simas. Moreover, such efforts or lack of them resulted in different amounts of physical tiredness and, consequently, the ability to enjoy the surroundings – different value creation capacity.

Our interview data supports the notion that the increase in comfort also comes with experience and skill:

The first time I was hitchhiking, I only had a sleeping bag. The second time, I had a sleeping bag and a sleeping pad, at least, which was nice. And then the third time I started packing a tent as well. So it's been improving, says Joel.

Another way to benefit from underutilised affordances while travelling unconventionally is developing the skill or courage to sneak in. Being on the outskirts of Antwerpen, Elizaveta needed to find a toilet in between two rides from Dordrecht to Gent and the map showed one public toilet nearby which, unfortunately, turned out to be an open male urinal under someone's windows. However, on the opposite side of the street stood a toilet booth and the only obstacle to using it was the fact that it was located at the construction site — meaning that, apparently, it was not designed for the public. Nevertheless, there was a way to go through the fence and the booth itself was not locked — in other words, it was a hidden affordance (Gaver, 1991) whose usage depended completely on one's willingness as technically there was no prohibition of such action.

Pictures 5-6. Toilet facilities in Antwerpen



As this can be seen from examples above, maintaining oneself in a good physical state on a road or in the city while travelling unconventionally requires a lot of attention and constant search for work-arounds that may fall out of the behavioural patterns socially expected from tourists or city dwellers in general. For this reason, unconventional travelling requires ‘mental exercises’ of negotiating social norms to get used to utilising affordances in such a way. Travellers re-evaluate priorities and comfort zones: maintaining physical comfort zone and fulfilling the needs of the body comes to the first place while social comfort zone and aligning with socially accepted behaviour becomes not focal. Our interviewee Lena describes the comparison of unconventional travelling with her everyday life in the following way:

When I'm traveling, all the basic needs have to be closed as I go. I mean, I have an extreme mode almost all the time, or, well, a more stimulated mode for survival,

because automatically, especially if you're couchsurfing and hitchhiking, you exclude all the stability of your life.

From other interviewees we heard that in such a survival mode bounds of the law can also be pushed:

Another thing is if, say, you violate the law somewhere, but you know, 'it's, like British say, not legal but nobody cares' – you can just sleep at the train station in the city laying under the bench. There is no available hostel in the whole city, what else can you do? – describes Viktor his experience of travelling in Austria.

Even though in classical edgework researchers explore the play with social norm, they do not define normative edge as a separate entity, where stepping over the boundary has consequences either in a form of social condemnation or as issues with the law. We, however, would like to define it as another dimension of the edgework given that in unconventional travelling norm negotiation plays a crucial role (Reichenberger, 2017). Based on the interview and field trip data, we can conclude that walking the physical edge encourages travellers to play with the norm and push the normative edge as well.

Hitchhikers are self-aware that the activity they practice falls out of normative behaviour. Often in the dialogue they differentiate themselves from 'normal' people who *think you're crazy and they would never do it by themselves*, as Lena retells. Couchsurfers face social stigmatisation too: several interviewees mentioned that they prefer not to share information about Couchsurfing with colleagues not to provoke negative consequences at work while facing some kind of judgement even from friends or relatives: *I would say 90% of my friends don't really understand the spirit of couchsurfing. They often make fun of me, let's say, judge in a funny way*, tells Onur. However, such an attitude does not diminish motivations of unconventional travellers to engage in hitchhiking and couchsurfing which can be interpreted in two ways: firstly, unconventional travellers may develop 'immunity' helping to resist social pressure which also helps while travelling, and secondly, motivations and value creation aspects must overweight any social pressure.

Emotional work

While hard skills are important for finding affordances, communication is what genuinely cannot be overestimated in unconventional travelling. Importantly, getting both rides and accommodation in unconventional travelling turn out to be non-commercial but not free either. Communication serves as a fuel or currency – and the potential for value

creation and co-creation. Lena notes the empowering character of communication while travelling:

And so for me, it's a big feeling of freedom when I can literally survive or move my body from place to place by myself. Just by communication.

Here communication works as an instrumental skill that enables access to mobility and accommodation. When hitchhikers make a sign or establish eye contact while waiting for a ride, non-verbal communication happens: *On a road you're always in a dialogue with the driver. And the way you behave in this dialogue affects the result – who stops, with what intentions, in particular,* believes Alina. Importantly, the appearance can be included into the communication aspect: interviewees note that they deliberately maintain a clean and neat look unambiguously signalling their purpose of being on the road. Eric explains:

And one sign of somebody who's in a bad situation is they don't have any stuff. They kind of just woke up someplace and said, 'I have to get someplace'. I don't wish bad on those people, but in general, you don't want to be confused for one of those people. They got drunk and ended up someplace else or they're really having a mental event. So being able to be disambiguated from those people is pretty important.

Interactions are two-sided: facial expressions of drivers clearly show their mood and willingness to help while certain gestures are used to signal that driving locally, making a turn soon or inability to pick up because of the lack of space in the car.

Importantly, such communication from the hitchhiker's side can also have a performative character – and that is the moment when it becomes a currency. Travellers need to radiate friendliness and safety to increase the chances to get a ride or 'pay' back to the driver with their stories. However, hitchhikers might not feel like smiling or joking and then having this 'communicative' smile would be an act of frontstage performance in Goffman's (1959) terms or surface acting in Hochschild's (1953) sense. While being on the first hitchhiking trip in their lives, Alice and Tara, described their positioning on the road the following way:

I don't think you will ever see us smile as much as we do when we are standing on the road hitchhiking. Yeah. We just one big smiley face. We try to look so welcoming and friendly and happy. And every time the car passes through, our smile just disappear. We try to be happy and laugh about it.

However, surface acting is not the only strategy employed for emotional work while hitchhiking. Long waiting periods between rides might significantly affect the mood, so

travellers need to master deep acting as well – and as our field trip showed, this skill also comes with the experience.

For example, waiting for an hour in vain for Simas was a challenge while Elizaveta employed ‘coping’ strategies as soon as frustration started crawling to us. Listening to music and mentally emphasising the positive side of travel helped to change the focus from bad luck to the fact of travelling itself. For Simas it helped to see a luck symbol – horse shoe – right at the spot where we faced both long waiting time and fear of locals. Finally, we got our next ride in two minutes after we consciously put effort into managing our emotions. This example shows how unconventional travellers need to employ emotional management to prevent value destruction and not to overstep the psychological edge. Importantly, such deep acting is not always a conscious choice, sometimes the fact of hitchhiking and participating in an adventure influences the mood positively, as Anton notes:

Usually when you're already on the road with your thumb up, your mood immediately gets better. You need to communicate with people, make contact. And some kind of actions, adventures begin. It's very interesting. Couchsurfing is the same

In the case of Couchsurfing, deep and especially surface acting are still present. To establish friendly connections with hosts, travellers need to present themselves as trustworthy and appealing people. Later, especially if there is no strong personality match, acting stays as a courtesy to the host and the way not to fall into the pit of value destruction. However, even when genuine connection appears, the amount of communication might be overwhelming – as it happened with us in Hamburg. As a result, maintaining the dialogue becomes a necessity – and the act of emotional work, which sometimes requires prioritising the role over personal needs or tiredness.

Being hosted by a blind person in Gent, we could clearly realise the difference between performing in communication and being liberated from such work. We came to the host's place around midnight, sleepy and tired, so it was rather hard to look energetic in the dialogue even though it was genuinely an interesting talk for us. However, we were able to skip the visual part of the performance and act with voices only – or even ‘hide’ in silence when necessary, which allowed us to save some energy.

Even though research on edgework already acknowledges psychological edgework, we would like to emphasise that psychological dimension can be considered another – the third – edge that unconventional travellers walk. Ultimately, we would like to conceptualise

physical risks, norm, and psychological state as three edges or three dimensions of edgework.

5.2. Evolution of experiential values

Motivations for engaging in unconventional travelling and consequently values sought in this activity often evolve over time. While economic considerations, such as saving money on transportation and accommodation, frequently serve as an entry point, they tend to become less central with experience. Instead, immaterial aspects, including social interaction, emotional intensity, and the pursuit of adventure, gain prominence. Several interviewees mentioned that they started hitchhiking being students without extra money to spend on travelling, therefore unconventional travelling with no transportation costs sounded appealing. However, they report that the genuine sense of unconventional travelling came very fast since the first experience. This shift reflects a broader transformation in how value is constructed within these practices. Material exchange is gradually replaced by the exchange of stories, emotions, and experiences. What initially appears as a cost-saving strategy becomes a framework for generating meaningful encounters, and, over time, these encounters can become the main objective of travel itself (Prebensen et al., 2014).

5.2.1. Values of the edgework

Several participants mentioned that in the very beginning of their 'hitchhiking careers' they engaged in unconventional travelling because of financial reasons: either they could not afford same amount of travelling within institutionalised tourism or their friends were already into hitchhiking and couchsurfing and could introduce them to cheaper ways of transportation and accommodation finding: *I started hitchhiking at the second year of university and I didn't have money then. Among my friends, we all studied on the same course and tried firstly to save on trips and spice them up, I guess, in the second turn,* tells Alina. However, after gaining some experience, none of the interviewees place material aspects in the first place. On the contrary, travellers emphasise that they do hitchhiking and couchsurfing out of other reasons even when they can easily afford paid transportation or accommodation:

I was coming to Copenhagen for work and my company was paying my hotel. But I couchsurfed in Malmö just to meet my friends in Malmö and just to hang out with my host, shares Onur.

Most of the time, like Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Iran – all these, you know, places where we hitchhiked, you can just pay the bus or the taxi. Even though you make three hours drive, four, five hours drive, it's just only a few euros. So it's not about the money at all. And I think it's not worth it because of the money – taking this risk, I think. It's just about the vibe and about the adrenaline also, because of course, you don't know whom you will get to know and what kind of car you will get, what kind of people it's the adrenaline and it's that excitement. Also, because it's a risky thing. But because of that, it's such an enjoyable thing actually to do, tells Esra.

Notably, participants warn against the consumerist approach to unconventional travelling, stressing that it is actually not free but powered by communication – and that without willingness to engage into this communication, the process does not make sense. Viktor states:

Hitchhiking is not about free things, first of all, it's about respect for the world around. When you respect, it starts to help you. That's the global belief <...>You shouldn't feel like a person who just needs a free ride. I think hitchhiking is not for people who just need to get somewhere silently from point A to point B for free. For me, it's first and foremost entertainment

However, economic restraint may persist even when it is no longer strictly necessary. In such cases, limiting expenditure becomes an intentional strategy aimed at maximising interaction and maintaining alignment with the ethos of unconventional travelling (Andrades & Dimanche, 2014). Alice and Tara motivate their choice:

We put a low daily budget we are living from. We did this to push ourselves to be more outgoing. We are depending on people's hospitality and kindness. If we just had this huge budget, we could just buy a hotel room when everything was feeling shitty.

Thus, saving money transitions from being a goal to a byproduct of a value system that prioritises experience over consumption. At the same time, main experience-related motivations that can be derived from our data are: seeking of freedom and adventure, general intensification of experience; social bonding with locals and better understanding of the place; personal development and challenging one's possibilities.

Hyperreality

Placing oneself close to the edge tends to be perceived as an emancipating experience allowing for temporary break from the rationalised and disenchanted world (Ritzer, 2019). Alina emphasises the uniqueness of experience that can be gained in unconventional travelling:

At some point I feel that the time has come and I miss it. Because when I hitchhike, I have a feeling that does not appear with any other activities. The feeling of limitless freedom and the merge with the moment. You live with the road. You see it completely. And you feel it throughout.

Importantly, uncertainty characterising unconventional travelling is what significantly contributes to intensification of experience. Uncertainty of hitchhiking and couchsurfing allows travellers to step outside of their rationalised routines and corresponding norms which, consequently, encourages them to step beyond usual behavioural patterns and comfort zones. For many interviewees this opportunity to break out of the ordinary is the main value outcome of the unconventional travelling:

I don't need any sense of adventure in my ordinary life – when I study and work – I need stability as a base, that is housing, safety, food, warmth. When I'm on a trip, it's an adventure mode, when I allow myself to experience all these adventures, and my goal is to get into these adventures and instability <...> It's brighter, it evokes more emotions, that's it. More impressions, more adventures, more memories. Well, that is, just the whole trip is felt x2 in terms of sensations, explains Lena.

For someone, experiencing uncertainty becomes so significant that they can compare it with addiction, as Karl does:

It does feel a little dangerous. And then when you get through it... I think that if you get satisfaction out of it, it is unlike anything else. It's a weird drug. It is kind of like a drug. It's a test. You know, you stand on the side of the road for up to two, ten hours sometimes, and you don't know if anybody's coming. You don't know if you have enough water. So I think I do it to challenge myself and see how I respond

Facing the uncertainty with a hope to achieve positive outcomes becomes a sort of a survival challenge that is enjoyed and used as a catalyst enabling unconventional travellers

to perceive the uncertainty not as a precursor for risk, but instead an element that allows serendipitous interactions and movement to occur.

As our observation showed, sometimes playing with the norm can be the factor intensifying travel experience. While waiting for our host in Ghent to invite us to his place, we decided to prepare dinner at the park bench on our gas burner. Importantly, we were in the most secluded part of the park – just to enjoy the solitude during the sunset and not to be bothered while cooking. We clearly understood that our meal was not a common thing to do, but that could only make the noodles tastier. *However, at some moment of our dinner a guy appeared on a bicycle, not looking like a disadvantaged individual himself, and prepared to urinate 10 metres from our bench. Unfortunately, our objection that there was a urinal in 30 seconds of walking did not have any effect on him which made us think that, apparently, he could see us as marginalised people.* Luckily, the incident did not provoke any value destruction for us two which aligns with the data from interviews collected that odd events and enduring physical hardships tend to become fun stories to remember and tell the friends rather than become truly bad memories. Within edgework theory these notions can be conceptualised as a hyperreality feeling (Kidder, 2022), known in the research as one of central edgework values.

Social bonding

Despite the role of risk in shaping experiences, unconventional travellers value not only extreme or dramatic events. Even situations that involve potential risk, such as engaging in excessive drinking or other questionable behaviours, are not necessarily remembered as defining experiences. Instead, travellers often describe rather ordinary moments as the most meaningful and memorable. Viktor gives an example:

It was some kind of tradition-not-tradition for me, I took many Khokhloma Russian spoons with me to Europe, gave them to those whom I particularly liked, who especially helped. So I gave a spoon to him [host in Central Europe], he looked at it and said, 'listen, you know, my daughter collects spoons'. It was such a wild match. We exchanged emails. He himself then wrote to me, sent me photos, 'here is my house, here is my farm'. He asked to send my photos of the place where I lived and so on. It was very heartwarming.

These moments of spontaneous connection represent a key form of value creation, grounded in strong emotional connection rather than material transaction. Our

interviewees emphasised that many encounters with drivers and hosts left a deep impression on them:

You pass their lives through yourself. I do not know, the understanding that you live in a world that is full of people who are ready and want to share with you something so pure and so good no matter ... Something bad, I don't know. It's just not like anything else. And once they try, people probably get divided into two types: either it's okay but rather not repeat or it goes into the blood and stays, says Alina.

Since these encounters are short-term and participants will likely never meet again, they can create unusually open and intimate conversations that foster temporary trust and connection between strangers.

With the overall experiential character of value created in both aspects of unconventional travelling, the data collected makes it evident that there are some differences in why travellers benefit from hitchhiking and couchsurfing. Hitchhiking is described primarily as a way to meet people *whom you would not meet otherwise* and have good conversations with them, while Couchsurfing is chosen also because of the wish to explore the area with a local person. Anton explains:

If you stay via Couchsurfing and the host is cool, you have opportunities which you simply don't have if you live separately. This person is emotionally engaged, you spend time with them, tell stories. It's like hitchhiking. Very similar. I mean your lives cross. And you get the opportunity to share experiences, share cultures. You get the opportunity to see the city normally more diverse because usually couchsurfers are very... They inspire you to walk around the city with them. They know a lot of things, and are interested in telling you about them.

This emphasises the importance of 'ordinary' tourist motivation in unconventional travelling: as our trip showed, without curiosity about the destination, the potential for value creation is lower.

Personal development

Norm negotiating and acting out of the ordinary while travelling non-market based leads to the shift of norm perception among individuals involved. Out of binary classification, the norm transforms in a spectrum where there are more than one way of dealing with each situation. As a result, pushing the boundaries becomes a process of learning via experiencing the unknown. Ultimately, such an edgy way of interaction with

reality leads to the development of specific personal characteristics such as a non-judgemental approach and openness to the Other: *It's how I grew up. You know, it's just, I don't judge people. I can understand them as well*, explains Onur. When travelling unconventionally, hitchhikers and couchsurfers learn not to be bothered about the opinion of the generalised other – what other people might think or how others could perceive them. Consequently, they might gain the habit not to judge others as well and gain the immunity of enacting their agency in various situations. This can be understood or interpreted as freedom of choice. Importantly, this process of pushing the norm and worldview expanding is gradual, though it can lead individuals to very least expected outcomes:

Somehow my road led to this culture thing and staying at hosts and, you know, doing hitchhiking and then going to very, very remote places like in Pakistan and Afghanistan. I couldn't even imagine doing these kinds of things only like three years ago. But now I feel stronger, more self-confident, braver. And I can imagine doing things which are a little bit more like even for my imagination, controversial and too much, you know. But after, after stepping a little bit outside of your comfort zone and you see, okay, it's not that bad. So you can make one more step. And then you see, okay, still I can handle it. And then you make one more step, shares Esra.

As it can be seen from our interview data, constant dealing with uncertainty and risk-mitigation encourages unconventional travellers to develop strong decision-making, crisis-management and stress-resisting skills. For example, not knowing where to sleep at night during the whole day, typical for unconventional travelling, not only adds up an adventurous intrigue but also teaches individuals to find solutions under high environmental and psychological pressure. These value outcomes, as Lupton (2024) notes, can be used in one's career development:

When I'm doing job interviews, I mention my hitchhiking. Because I feel it gives some unique character to my person. I guess hitchhiking helped me because, I mean, it makes you more comfortable with uncertainty as well, says Joel.

Moreover, unconventional travelling fosters agency and self-reliance and resilience of individuals. Given the scope of friction existing in the riskscape, survival skills and the confidence in one's capability to find the way out of any complicated situation become inseparable from unconventional travelling: *I've become such a braver person, more self-confident*, believes Esra.

Obviously, unconventional travelling also develops communicational skills of individuals in both oral and written form as the major part of storytelling in a car or host's place lies on the traveller's shoulders. What is more, finding an accommodation via Couchsurfing requires the ability to formulate requests in a persuasive manner as well as the skill to distinguish the character of a potential host solely by their written self-description.

Additionally, unconventional travelling allows individuals to develop the ability of enjoying small and mundane things. Since the majority of experiences within hitchhiking and couchsurfing are rather ordinary – mostly, talking with locals and seeing places not widely known as landmarks – seeing the beauty of the simple becomes the art that needs to be mastered. Mundane spaces are heavily governed by everyday social scripts, therefore, deploying agency in a mundane space usually requires breaking those very scripts. According to Mead (1934), reactive me, bound in social norms, is not an authentic self, while even small changes in mundane settings can help active I to break free. In this way, during the field trip, cooking on a gas burner in the park or walking the city at 1 am allowed us to enjoy the situation more compared to if we behaved completely according to the expected behaviour. In our interview data it can be seen that travellers tend appreciate such personal experiences happening in ordinary but special settings:

I've never been as happy with a place I stayed in my life as waking up alone in the desert and watching the sun come up with no tent or anything else. I've been to hotel rooms before, but I've never been to a hotel room that made me feel on top of the world. It's just a room. So yeah, I always felt safe and happy in the middle of no place hitchhiking, says Liam.

Being constantly present for extended periods of time while navigating the riskscape requires a lot of energy and mental capacity from individuals, but as can be seen in the interview data, most of the travellers notice that learned skills and internal negotiation strategies have a long term effect and a shift in identity that remains present after these kinds of travels (Kidder, 2022).

5.2.2. Value destruction

As any other tourist activity, unconventional tourism is not free from value destruction aspects (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011). However, as it can be seen from our data, elements of value destruction are rather scarce within hitchhiking and couchsurfing – or

we were lucky during our field trip while our interviewees' did not report many negative moments. Notably, even though unconventional travellers acknowledge the hardships of activities they engage in, they mostly transform controversial experiences into learning and story-making. What could be mentioned as elements of value destruction is mostly connected to lack of human connection and the commodification of the riskscape.

The first day in Hamburg we were exhausted, however, our host lacked attentiveness instead needing an audience for sharing his stories, opinions, and ranting, which forced an interesting dichotomous state. Simas felt a need to maintain his friendly frontstage act of being a good listener, despite being barely able to stay awake. This deviance of emotions between the frontstage act and the backstage tiredness meant that interpersonal value was co-created and maintained entirely at the expense of backstage value destruction: the inability to establish this boundary resulted in a direct sacrifice of personal well-being to sustain the frontstage performance.

As it was mentioned in section 5.1.1, sometimes Couchsurfing gets misused by individuals who seek sexual affairs instead of cultural exchange. Our interviewees mentioned that such behaviour became more common in recent years compared to the mid-2010s when they just entered the platform. This situation partially destroys the trust existing within the community and forces some couchsurfers to note on their profiles that they do not use the platform as a dating app. When not recognised in advance, predatory motives of Couchsurfing-misusers can lead to significant value destruction when encountered by genuine travellers.

What is more, the increasing commodification of platforms associated with unconventional travelling transforms the riskscape and constrains its affordances. The transition of Couchsurfing from non-profit to for-profit platform and introduction of obligatory subscription in the EU and the USA washed out hosts that accommodated travellers irregularly as hosts got only two months of free subscription for every guest hosted. Consequently, such a mechanism reduces the availability of accommodation and limits opportunities for interaction.

That's why I haven't done it too much, as I have a hard time finding hosts. And it used to be free, now it seems like it costs money to use. Like I'm about to do another big journey across [US State], and I'm looking at Couchsurfing, but they want me to pay, which I never knew before. And I'm wondering if it's worth it. I might, I can't decide yet. But it really didn't do a lot for me when I used it. So I'm not sold on that source, complains Karl.

As access becomes monetised, the non-commercial ethos of exchange is undermined, and trust-based interactions are partially replaced by transactional logic: for example, hosting travellers not to lose the subscription instead of the genuine interest in the person. Moreover, users may adapt strategically, for example, misrepresenting location, which indicates tensions between platform governance and community norms. In this sense, commodification can be understood as an extension of the institutionalisation, restricting the openness that characterises unconventional travelling.

6. Concluding discussion

- *At this point, my questions are over. But if you want to say something that I did not ask you, but you think it is very important...*
- *Yes, hitchhiking is not for everyone – 100%. Not everyone needs it, not everyone can do it and not everyone wants it. This is a very specific way of perception. If a person has another way of perception, it is not good and not bad.*

Wrapping up the discussion about unconventional travelling, we have to acknowledge that navigation of the riskscape done by hitchhikers and couchsurfers is indeed a very different way of travelling compared to market-based interaction with tourist institutions usual for mass tourists. The findings demonstrate that unconventional travelling cannot be understood merely as a low-cost alternative to institutionalised tourism. Rather, hitchhiking and couchsurfing constitute forms of edgework in which experiential value emerges through active engagement in uncertainty, interpersonal trust, and negotiation of boundaries.

Previous edgework research has rarely conceptualised spatial boundaries as central to the activity itself. In unconventional travelling, however, the distinction between riskscape and safescape becomes analytically crucial because it reveals how hitchhikers and couchsurfers perform ordinary tourist practices using a fundamentally different – non-market based – approach. While institutionalised tourists interact with destinations through market-mediated infrastructures designed to minimise uncertainty, unconventional travellers intentionally enter spaces where uncertainty must be negotiated through personal agency and social interactions. The riskscape therefore operates as a relational environment enacting agency and trust and demanding the application of the specific skillset. Thus, by establishing the division between the riskscape and safescape, the $M \rightarrow ARS \rightarrow V$ framework allows to bridge the gap between relational theory of risk and edgework theory, employing theory of affordances, dramaturgy, and agency.

Importantly, the findings indicate that experiential value is generated mainly by uncertainty but not the risk itself. Answering the RQ3, we can say that risk functions primarily as a condition that requires travellers to activate agency and engage with the riskscape, whereas uncertainty creates the possibility for surprise, emotional intensity, and what participants described as social bonding and hyperreality. Norm negotiation plays a central role in this process because it continuously destabilises routine expectations and

requires travellers to reinterpret social situations, boundaries, and trust relations. Importantly, navigation of the physical edge rarely results in value destruction since travellers use events of failure as opportunities to learn or construct adventurous narratives. As a result, we can see how value is created within the riskscape by walking all three edges.

The study also demonstrates that unconventional travelling is enabled through a specific set of social and practical mechanics (RQ1). Communication functions as a central mechanism through which travellers obtain mobility and accommodation, since rides and hosting opportunities depend on the ability to appear trustworthy, emotionally competent, and socially adaptable. Storytelling, impression management, and forms of deep and surface acting (Hochschild, 1983) become exchangeable resources within non-market interactions. Similarly, successful hitchhiking depends on the ability to read spatial affordances (Gaver, 1991; Gibson, 1979), identify opportunities for movement and survival, and adapt behaviour to changing environments. These practices require a high degree of agency and correspond to Mead's (1934) concept of active I, as travellers must continuously make autonomous decisions under uncertain conditions.

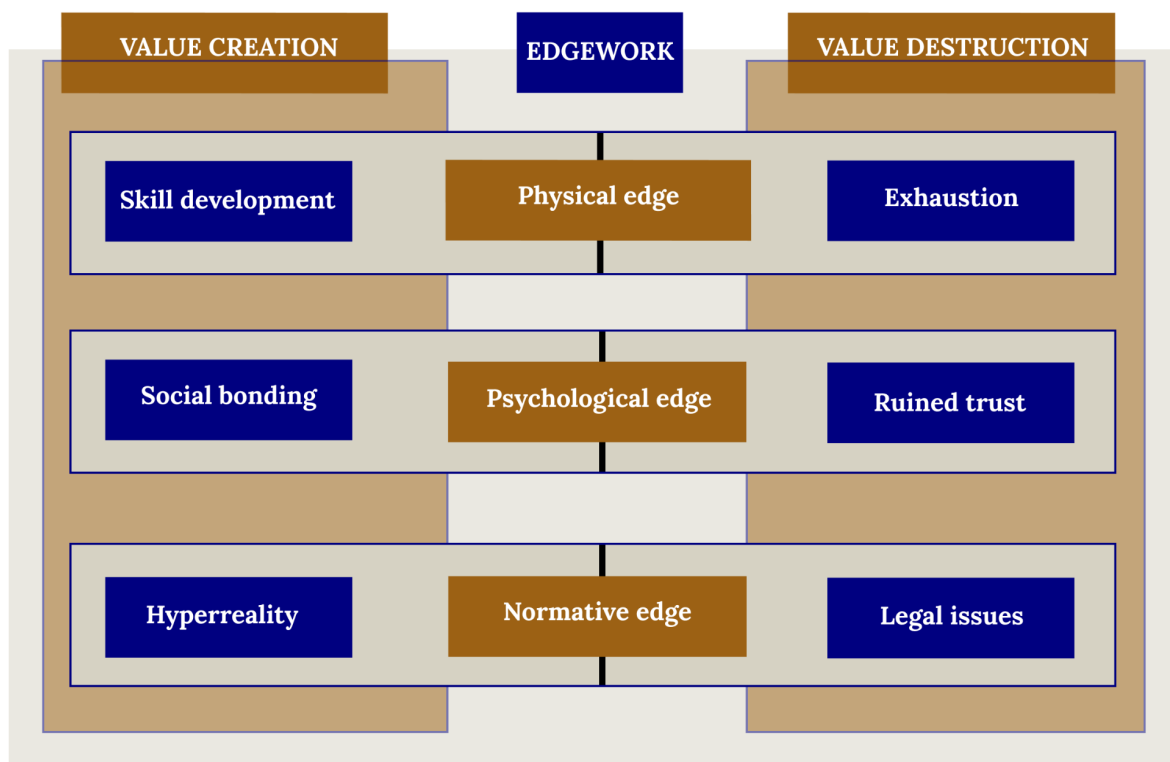
As for experiential values (RQ2), hyperreality and social bonding that emerge within unconventional tourist practices allow for the formation of memorable and meaningful experiences and may potentially contribute to improvements in well-being (Björk, 2014). Such experiences require individuals to remain highly present and to 'live in the moment' in order to find, evaluate, and navigate situations through their active agency and attention to the environment, other people, social norms, and rules. This activity enables travellers to navigate the riskscape with agency activated by using operant skills to transform otherwise stagnant operand spatial assets into opportunities for value creation. The process itself also includes an evaluative dimension, allowing tourists to assess their experiences and either disengage or re-enter the same riskscape 'loop' with an improved sense of identity.

Although hitchhiking and couchsurfing often position themselves symbolically outside market logic, the competencies developed through unconventional travelling may nevertheless remain successfully transferable to neoliberal forms of labour. Skills such as improvisation, emotional management, interpersonal communication, and rapid decision-making can be converted into professional and creative capital within contemporary service and creative industries, especially on the managerial level. This means that practices that are framed as contra-cultural in the mainstream narrative, have substantial potential of contributing to socioeconomic development. Moreover, at close

look, as the majority of risks are either imaginary or insignificant and manageable, the study shows that the activity is not so marginal as it is common to believe.

Overall, this thesis contributes to scholarship on unconventional tourism and edgework by conceptualising hitchhiking and couchsurfing as forms of relational edgework structured through riskscape navigation. By combining relational risk theory, edgework theory, affordance theory, and emotional work theory, the study develops a framework capable of explaining how uncertainty, norm negotiation, and agency produce experiential value within non-market travel practices. The findings further expand edgework scholarship by demonstrating that unconventional travelling involves simultaneous navigation of physical, psychological, and normative edges, thereby extending existing understandings of risk-based practices beyond primarily physical forms of edgework.

Figure 4. *Value creation and destruction within edgework*



However, the study reflects the experiences of relatively financially secure Western travellers, which shapes both access to unconventional mobility and perceptions of acceptable risk. Further research is therefore needed to explore how hitchhiking and couchsurfing operate across different socioeconomic, cultural, and geopolitical contexts. Particularly relevant directions for future research include gendered experiences of

riskscape navigation, colonial dimensions of unconventional mobility, and inequalities embedded within supposedly non-market travel practices.

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Appendix A. Interview guide

When and why did you start hitchhiking? And Couchsurfing? [*How did you know that it's something you possible can do*]

Why do you do that now? [*What motivates you to travel this way now?*]

[*How do you prepare for your travelling? What digital resources do you use?*]

If you had a free bus or plane ticket to the destination on the same continent right now, would you take it or would you still hitchhike? Why?

If you could afford any type of accommodation, what would you prefer?

You are in a new town. Walk me through how you find your spot. What are you looking for?

What makes you give up waiting for a ride?

How do you try to look when hitchhiking? Describe your face, clothes, behaviour?

What is the biggest mistake a hitchhiker can make?

In one word or one feeling, how does it feel when the car finally stops?

How do you behave in the car or at a host's place?

How do you look for a host?

How do people around you react to your way of travelling? [*How do drivers react?*]

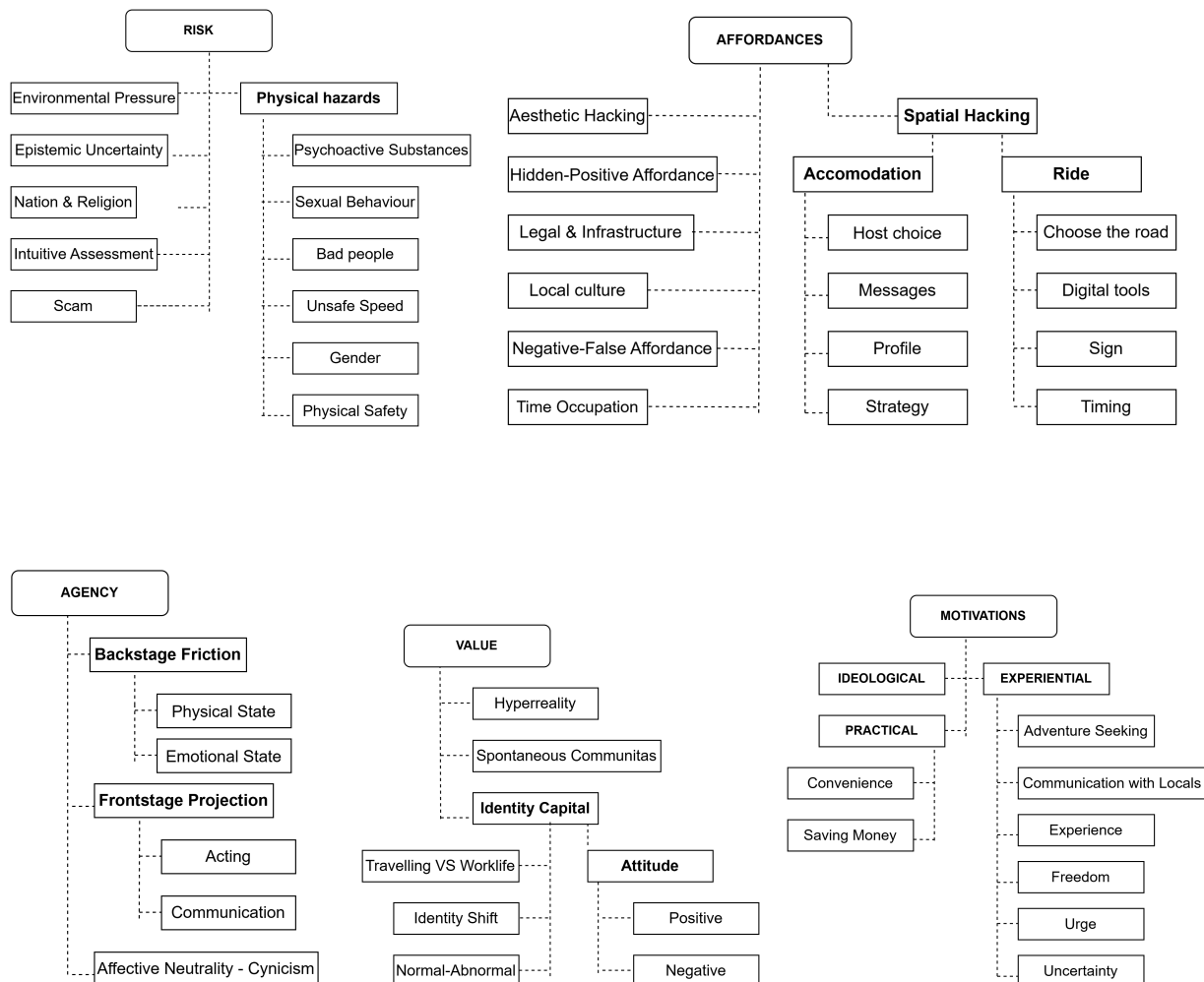
Have you ever refused a ride from someone who stopped or left the place of a host? What was the specific thing that made you say 'no'?

What was the most memorable experience while hitchhiking and couchsurfing?

Tell me about a conversation with a driver or host that you still remember today. Why did it stick with you?

Think about your 'normal' life at home or work. How is the 'version of you' on the road different from the 'version of you' at home?

Appendix B. Thematic analysis



Appendix C. Hitchhiking timestamps

Coordinates	Waiting time	Distance	Driver's sex	Notes
N 56.02965° E 12.59960°	50 minutes	67 km	Male (alone)	
N 55.56002° E 12.22911°	22 minutes	133 km	Male (alone)	
N 54.49645° E 11.22107°	55 minutes	7 km	Female (with a child)	
N 54.44633° E 11.17067°	55 minutes	15 km	Male (alone)	
N 54.36448° E 11.01007°	44 minutes	15 km	Male (alone)	
N 53.87605° E 10.66565°	41 minute	50 km	Male (alone)	
N 53.55020° E 10.02777°	31 minute	8 km	Male (alone)	
N 53.48355° E 10.02382°	12 minutes	144 km	Male (with a child)	
N 52.42207° E 9.54887°	107 minutes	159 km	Female (two friends)	
N 51.63357° E 7.86964°	26 minutes	61 km	Male (alone)	
N 51.49431° E 6.99708°	88 minutes	-	-	No luck at that road in three places around
N 52.33963° E 4.81252°	25 minutes	25 km	Male (alone)	
N 52.29357° E 4.52344°	9 minutes	18 km	Female (alone)	
N 52.16687° E 4.44972°	5 minutes	27 km	Male (alone)	
N 52.08857° E 4.32140°	55 minutes	32 km	Female (alone)	
N 51.92669° E 4.53580°	23 minutes	23 km	Male (alone)	
N 51.83291° E 4.61970°	62 minutes	83 km	Female (alone)	
N 51.22102° E 4.36002°	32 minutes	14 km	Male (alone)	
N 51.24236° E 4.18956°	8 minutes	26 km	Male (alone)	
N 51.18316° E 3.83268°	7 minutes	18 km	Female (alone)	
N 51.02359° E 3.73213°	21 minutes	43 km	Male (alone)	
N 50.88002° E 4.25642°	6 minutes	7 km	Male (with his mother)	