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Hitchhiking: associations with Big Five and emotional competences

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Abstract

After a decrease in its practice, the interest in hitchhiking is currently renewed. However, so far, very little is known about the personality characteristics of hitchhikers. Consequently, the aim of this study was to investigate the associations between hitchhiking and personality traits, with the Big Five and emotional competences. Five hundred and seventy-eight travellers (452 hitchhikers, $M_{age}=28.4$ years old; and 126 non-hitchhikers, $M_{age}=27.7$ years old) took part in the study. Participants completed an online survey including hitchhiking behaviour, the Big Five Inventory, and the Profile for Emotional Competences. After controlling for sociodemographic factors, hitchhiking was found to be positively associated with openness, and negatively associated with neuroticism. No associations were found with emotional competences. These findings improve our understanding of the personality characteristics associated with hitchhiking, however longitudinal studies are required to understand how hitchhiking is related to personality.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence; Big Five; Emotional Competences; Hitch-hiking; Five-factor model

1 Introduction

Hitchhiking is defined as the act of soliciting rides from strangers as well as a form of transport, in which the hitchhiker tries to get a lift from a random driver, usually a car or truck driver, for free without prior arrangement and as a one-way trip, usually not involving a change of an initial route (Vedernikov, Kulik, & Ramamohanarao, 2016). Though the phenomenon of hitchhiking was widespread in the 1960s and early 1970s, it lost popularity over time due to different factors (Chesters & Smith, 2001; O'Regan, 2013). However, a new generation of hitchhikers has emerged modernising hitchhiking, giving it new meanings, and figuring out new methods to deal with the challenges hitchhikers face (Kendall, 2016).

The only meta-analysis on hitchhiking showed the limited amount of research which accumulated over the years (Kotz, 2017). It seems there is only one study which focused on hitchhiker personality so far (Franzoi, 1985). Specifically, in comparison to non-hitchhikers, hitchhikers have been found to have a higher degree of impulsiveness, autonomy, tolerance for complexity and change, and a strong interest in interpersonal relations (Franzoi, 1985). Given this previous study used an outdated personality instrument (i.e., The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator), the current study aims to update and investigate personality characteristics of modern hitchhikers in comparison to non-hitchhikers, with a focus on the Big Five and on emotional competences.

The Big Five (Costa & McCrae, 2012) dimensions may be related to hitchhikers' personality in different ways. Regarding extraversion, its facets represent aspects of warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity, excitement-seeking and positive emotions (John & Srivastava, 1999). While hitchhiking, one will meet many different kinds of people. To stay mobile, hitchhikers need to establish a connection with their drivers, therefore being sociable, entertaining and amicable would provide a significant advantage (O'Regan, 2012). Consequently, we would assume that hitchhikers are more extrovert than non-hitchhikers.

Regarding agreeableness, its facets encompass trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, and tender-mindedness (John & Srivastava, 1999). Whilst hitchhiking the hitchhiker will learn to trust more people without being judgmental about looks, religion, origin or culture of their drivers (Chesters & Smith, 2001). The hitchhikers also have to display an agreeable attitude towards the drivers, which could help to maximize feelings of interest and safety and minimize those of danger in the driver (Morgan, Lockard, Fahrenbruch, & Smith, 1975). Consequently, we would assume that hitchhikers have a higher degree of agreeableness than non-hitchhikers.

Regarding neuroticism, it can be described as an emotionally unstable mindset and fragility to experiencing negative emotions including insecurity, fear, and worry (John & Srivastava, 1999). Hitchhiking is publicly seen as a risky and fearsome behaviour (Chesters & Smith, 2001). A person who scores high on neuroticism would be unlikely to regularly practice a widely feared behaviour. Consequently, we assume that hitchhikers have a lower degree on neuroticism than non-hitchhikers.

Conscientiousness is defined as the socially regulated impulse control that promotes task- and goal-directed behaviour, delaying gratification, such as thinking before acting, following rules and norms, and organising, planning and prioritising tasks (John & Srivastava, 1999). By definition, and due to its uncertainty, hitchhiking would not appear as the best travelling option for people who like to plan and have control. Additionally, hitchhikers have been found to have a high tendency for impulsivity (Franzoi, 1985). Consequently, we would assume that hitchhikers have a lower degree of conscientiousness than non-hitchhikers.

Regarding openness, it refers to individuals described as imaginative, creative, independent, curious, and open to diverse perspectives regarding fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas, and values (John & Srivastava, 1999). Hitchhikers have been found to have a high degree of tolerance for complexity and change, which would be linked to openness

(Franzoi, 1985). Additionally, due to the diversity of the people they meet (O'Regan, 2012), being open-minded is likely to make rides easier for hitchhikers providing them with a more rewarding experience. Consequently, we would assume that hitchhikers have a higher degree of openness than non-hitchhikers.

Emotional competences are defined as the extent to which individuals experience, express, identify, understand, regulate, and use their own emotions and those of others (Brasseur, Grégoire, Bourdu, & Mikolajczak, 2013). The characteristics of hitchhiking (Vedernikov, Kulik Ramamohanarao, 2016), namely the uncertainty of the waiting on the road, soliciting a ride from a stranger, and then eventually sharing a ride with a stranger, make emotional competences theoretically highly relevant for this activity. For example, in the waiting phase, hitchhikers can be continually facing emotional ups and downs, given waiting for hours on the road, regardless of weather conditions, being under the gaze of people, switching between the hope of a car approaching and the disappointment of the car not stopping can be tiring and exhausting (O'Regan, 2012, 2013). Still hitchhikers need to regulate these emotions appropriately and express positive emotions in order to increase their ride chances (Kotz, 2017; O'Regan, 2012). Deciding to get into a car which stopped will also involve emotions based on safety/threat appraisals. While sharing the drive with a stranger, hitchhikers should identify and understand the drivers current emotional state, and based on this, regulate and use emotions appropriately to adapt the discussion content and/or emotional tone according to the emotional needs they perceive in the driver. Emotional competences will also facilitate empathetic behaviour to driver stories, hitchhikers need to show good listening skills if they want to increase the likelihood the driver will take them further or even in some occasions make change in travel plans to help the hitchhiker. In summary, hitchhiking would likely be associated to an overall higher degree of emotional competences, at both the intrapersonal and interpersonal level.

To sum up, there is a lack of research regarding the personality of modern hitchhikers that limits our understanding of hitchhiking behaviour. To address this gap, the current study aims to investigate personality characteristics of hitchhikers in comparison to non-hitchhikers, regarding the Big Five and emotional competences. Based on previous research, we hypothesized that extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience and emotional competences (intrapersonal and interpersonal) are positively associated to hitchhiking experience, whereas conscientiousness and neuroticism are negatively related to hitchhiking experience.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

The sample comprised 578 internationally travelled participants: 452 (220 female, 222 male, 10 did not report gender; $M_{\text{age}}=28.4$ years old, age range: 18-60) reported hitchhiking, while 126 never hitchhiked (71 female, 54 male, 1 did not indicate gender, $M_{\text{age}}=27.7$ years old, age range: 18-74). Hitchhikers had travelled to more countries ($M=20.2$; $SD=17$) than non-hitchhikers ($M=9.3$; $SD=8.8$; Mann-Whitney $U=1791$, $p < .001$). The number of hitchhiking trips among hitchhikers was: 1-3=27.7%, 4-10=27.7%, 10-29=18.8%, 30-50=7.7%, more than 50=18.1%. The participants originated from 64 different countries (see supplementary materials for monthly income), most participants came from western countries (France=11.9%, Germany=10%, Canada=8.1%, Russia=4.7%, USA=4.4%). Ethical approval was granted by a university Ethics Committee.

2.2 Instruments

Participants were asked sociodemographic questions about gender, age, income, country of origin, how many countries they visited, whether they already hitchhiked, and if yes how many hitchhiking trips they realized.

The 44-item Big-Five-Inventory (BFI-44; John & Srivastava, 1999) was used to investigate agreeableness, extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, and openness to experience (e.g., “I see myself as someone who is original, comes up with new ideas.”). Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Reliability coefficients of the current data ranged from $\alpha=.72-.80$ for the five subscales.

The 50-item Profile of Emotional Competence (Brasseur et al. 2013) assesses five emotional competences (i.e., identification, expression, understanding, regulation, use). Items are anchored on a five-point Likert scale, from “the statement does not describe you at all” to “the statement describes you very well”. Each emotional competence is assessed from an intrapersonal (e.g., “When I feel good, I can easily tell whether it is due to being proud of myself, happy or relaxed.”) and interpersonal (e.g., “When I see someone who is stressed or anxious, I can easily calm them down.”) perspective. We used the intrapersonal ($\alpha=.76$) and interpersonal ($\alpha=.81$) summary scales in the current research.

2.3 Procedure

A survey was created using the online platform SoSci-Survey. The survey was distributed from the 9th of January to the 10th of April 2019 in English language. The link was posted to social media groups linked to travelling, couch-surfing, and hitchhiking communities. The average completion time was approximately 30 minutes. The participants provided informed consent and were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw their participation at any point without explanation and consequence.

2.4 Data analysis

Zero-order correlation coefficients were computed to identify the strength of associations independent of other factors. To test the association between the Big Five and emotional competences, a hierarchical regression model was computed with hitchhiking set as the dependent variable (dummy variable: 0 = non-hitchhiker; 1 = hitchhiker), and predictor

variables were entered into the regression model in two blocks: Block 1: sociodemographic variables (age, sex, income), and Block 2: the Big Five dimensions and emotional competences (intrapersonal and interpersonal scales).

3 Results

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations can be found in Supplementary material. The following variables were correlated with hitchhiking: number of visited countries ($r = .28$, $p < .001$), extraversion ($r = .11$, $p = .008$), agreeableness ($r = .10$, $p = .013$), neuroticism ($r = -.13$, $p = .001$), and openness ($r = .20$, $p < .001$).

In the regression model, at Step 1 no variable was significantly associated with hitchhiking. At Step 2 ($R^2 = .07$, $p < .001$), neuroticism ($\beta = -.15$, $p = .010$) and openness ($\beta = .17$, $p = .001$) were significantly associated with hitchhiking. A post-hoc power calculation using G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) returned a value of power $1 - \beta = .99$.

4 Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify the personality characteristics (i.e., Big Five and emotional competences) associated with hitchhiking behaviour. Results partially confirmed our hypotheses, in that hitchhiking was associated, after controlling for sociodemographic variables, positively with openness, and negatively with neuroticism. However, no associations were found with emotional competences.

Regarding the sociodemographic variables, none of the variables assessed was found to be associated with hitchhiking. This may point to the fact that sociodemographic characteristics such as age, sex, and income aren't important moderators for modern hitchhiking behaviour. Our findings have to be put into perspective with the findings of the meta-analysis by Kotz (2017), indicating that sex moderates the base-rate of hitchhiking success, with a higher base-rate for females. We may conclude that sex does not play a role for engaging regularly in hitchhiking behaviour, however it does play a role regarding hitchhiking success.

Further, regarding personality traits, the negative association with neuroticism is in line with our hypothesis, given individuals who have a tendency to experience negative emotions are less likely to engage in situations involving fear, insecurity, and worry as hitchhiking is still negatively represented publicly (Chesters & Smith, 2001). The positive association with openness is also in line with our hypothesis and previous personality research in hitchhikers (Franzoi, 1985). Hitchhiking requires individuals to meet and talk to strangers who may display a large variety of opinions, attitudes, and behaviours to which the hitchhiker has to adapt. Contrary to our predictions, extraversion and agreeableness were not significantly associated with hitchhiking in the regression model, despite significant associations revealed with the zero order correlations. This is likely due to shared variance with openness and neuroticism regarding their association with hitchhiking. No other emotional competence was found to be significantly associated with hitchhiking, neither in the regression model nor in the zero-order correlations, which would reflect that hitchhiking is primarily associated with larger personality traits encompassed by the Big Five dimensions rather than specific emotional competences.

Our study had some strengths, namely it was to our knowledge the first study with current personality instruments and large diverse sample investigating personality in hitchhikers. Among the limitations, we can mention the disbalanced sample size between hitchhikers and non-hitchhikers, as well as the cross-sectional design that restricts claims of causality and direction of effects. Overall, correlations between personality traits and hitchhiking were relatively small, pointing to the small explanatory power of personality regarding hitchhiking behaviour (Funder & Ozer, 2019; Ozer, 2007), and to the fact other variables not assessed in the current study may play a role as well regarding engaging in hitchhiking. Future research may consider longitudinal designs given the theorized potential of hitchhiking to affect, develop, and transform the self (O'Regan, 2012). Interventions involving individual

hitchhiking or participating in hitchhiking community events may also be envisaged (Kendall, 2016), which could help to better understand the psychological aspects linked to engaging in hitchhiking behaviour.

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