

Master's Programme in International Design Business Management

“Pakuelämää” (FIN) “Vanlife” (ENG)

Discourse between Identities and Motivations of Finnish Vehicle Dwellers

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the developing phenomenon of vanlife among Finns through understanding how perceptions of vanlife and its related motivations interrelate with personal and Finnish identities. Limited academic studies exist on the topic of vanlife among Finns, despite its recent strong prevalence in various kinds of Finnish media. To address this research need, a qualitative study was conducted through interviews with 20 Finnish-identifying individuals living part- or full-time in their vehicles. Findings point to vanlife’s diversity, in that the lifestyle can be molded to fit various definitions of the lifestyle, motivations, and personal identities among its Finnish participants, with various core themes arising from each. Most significantly, this study found five core elements of specifically Finnish identity which impacts the way vanlife is motivated and experienced: shyness, an appreciation for peace and personal space, “mökki” or cabin culture, a deep connection and appreciation for nature, and “sisu,” a kind of Finnish perseverance. Overall, this research describes how an alternative lifestyle like vanlife uniquely presents itself among Finnish individuals prior to significant community formation and provides a base for further vanlife research among Finns or as a comparison for studies on vanlife within other nationalities.

Keywords vanlife; alternative lifestyles; digital nomadism; Finnish vanlife; Finland; motivation; identity; personal identity; national identity; vanlife community

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The story behind this Master's Thesis is rooted in a personal lifestyle change I planned and executed in 2022 to move into a van full-time. With my studies coming to an end, minus an exchange semester in Norway and the master's thesis, my longtime dream of living so-called "vanlife" and finding an engaging topic for the thesis came to fruition quite simultaneously. In the latter half of 2022, I secured a Finnish driving license, purchased a van self-converted to a camper by the previous owners, renovated it for my needs, sold close to everything I owned, let go of my Helsinki apartment, moved into the van in the cold of November, and researched and documented everything I could with this thesis in mind. Since the autumn of 2022, my van has served as my home on wheels throughout an exchange semester in Bergen, the remainder of my studies in Helsinki, various trips throughout the Nordics, Central, and Southern Europe, as well as many remote workdays. Having lived in a van since 2022, I have come in contact with various Finns with similar lifestyles both in person and through social media. Those individuals have inspired both me in continuing my lifestyle and in guiding the direction of this thesis.

This story would not have been possible without:

Claire Shaw

Thank you for guiding and supporting me throughout this thesis process.

Interviewees

*Thank you for your enthusiasm for this study, hope to meet more of you on the road
someday!*

Aalto Design Factory

*Thank you for providing space, knowledge, and support in kickstarting my own vanlife
journey.*

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1 INTRODUCTION

“Kaikki muut vaihtoehdot vaikuttaa huonommilta kun autossa asuminen.” (FIN)

“All other options seem worse than living in a car.” (ENG)

As this participant of this study states, living in a vehicle is a lifestyle viewed with utmost value. Vanlife (or in Finnish, pakuelämä) has experienced immense growth in the western world in the past years, with varying motivations and identities among different demographics and geographic regions prompting the lifestyle change. The researcher herself lives vanlife and has understood through years on the road that the lifestyle is at the stage of growth where a distinct community is forming among its Finnish participants. This study aims to understand these Finnish vanlifers through how they perceive their own lifestyles, their motivations, in addition to their personal and national identities. This research is especially important now before a stronger community identity forms among Finnish vanlifers, as community has the potential to impact individuals' ways of living and thoughts about their lifestyles. By obtaining a greater understanding of the early adopters of the lifestyle among Finns, can we more confidently devise reason for the initial popularity of vanlife through motivations and conclude how the lifestyle and its facets are unique among the Finns involved.

To have the clearest understanding of the relevant concepts within this study, key terminology must be defined. Many terms within and related to vanlife are debated upon, hence various academic sources will be used to define this terminology to reflect an average of the current discourse, with potential conflicts brought forward at more length in the literature review. Briefly, for this study, the term *Vanlife* will be used to describe an alternative lifestyle and subculture, where individuals reside in a vehicle either part- or full-time (Wichtmann et al., 2022; Bergstrom, 2019; DiGiorno, 2020). Other related terms which for the purposes of this study will be deemed equal to the term vanlife include vehicle dwellers (people living in vehicles, i.e., vanlifers) and roadlife (vanlife).

Vanlife is one among various forms of nomadic lifestyles stretching throughout history and geographic locations (Pietsch, 2021). *Nomadic Lifestyles* is included in a group of terms

often related to vanlife: *Nomadism*, *Digital Nomadism*, and overall various forms of *Nomads*. This study is framed solely on vanlife, although literature includes examples of other forms of nomadic lifestyles. Literature discussing topics within nomadism is utilized in this study due to its similarities to vanlife and lack of motivation-based literature regarding vanlife. Nomadism is a mode of life practiced throughout history where individuals or groups of people travel from place to place without a permanent home (Prabawa and Pertiwi, 2020; Aittamaa, 2021; Keskitalo, 2019). Recently, the term *Nomadism* has risen in popularity through the Digital Nomadism movement, which describes a more modern form of nomadism, where an individual's lifestyle consists of location independence and frequent travel often realized through means of digital job opportunities (Mouratidis, 2018, Aittamaa, 2022; Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017; Hall, G. et al., 2018). Both digital nomadism as well as vanlife can be considered as modern alternative lifestyles (Bergstrom, 2019; Aittamaa, 2022). These modes of life differ from the norm and have created distinct subcultures within themselves (ibid).

As people living in vans often move around, it is lastly critical to define what Finns, Finland, and the Finnish environment refer to in the framing of this study. Finns/Finnish individuals have a broad definition for this study. They are individuals from the country of Finland, identifying as Finnish, having some cultural or geographic connection to the nation, a deep connection to Finland, and/or feel that their homebase is in Finland. Finland refers to simply the geographic location of the country, but the Finnish environment includes Finland itself as a geographic location, Finns themselves, and the cultural implications and influences Finn's experience.

With the basis of these definitions, this study aims to further the discourse into vanlife among Finns and provide a basis for future study into the topic for various groups/regions. The following section describes the objectives and questions of this study in further detail.

1.1 Research Objectives and Questions

The objective of this study is to examine the trend of vanlife among Finns in the 2020's through assessing motivations and the lifestyle's connection to an individual's identity — both personal and national. The goal is to understand the phenomenon through its

participants and find commonalities among them which may result in a unique vanlife experience specifically for Finns.

The study uses Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Self-Determination, Identity-based Motivation, and Social Identity Theories as the theoretical bases for the study. The study has been conducted using ethnographic, qualitative research methods through thematic, semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 2016).

Due to a lack of academic research on vanlife among Finns, the study aims to provide general insights on how vanlife is currently present and understood among Finnish participants in the lifestyle. In addition to an overview of the status, the main research questions of this study are:

- 1. What are Finns' core motivations for participating in the lifestyle and how do they change over time?**
- 2. How does the identity of Finnish vanlifers connect to their lifestyle and motivations behind it?**
- 3. How does Finnish identity impact how vanlife is motivated and experienced?**

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This thesis enhances the conversation on Finnish vanlife through connecting and combining identity and motivation theory with strings of literature on vanlife and nomadism. The study focuses on Finns and the Finnish environment, although literature includes research from other geographical locations subjects due to lack of academic research these concepts in the context of Finland. News and other media sources have been included to provide more touchpoints for research on this topic in the Finnish environment. The objective of this approach is to provide more than just information on nomadism and

vanlife themselves, but also to show how the Finnish environment has potentially shaped the modes of life from any differences uncovered through this comparison.

All other academic research in Finland related to vanlife (n=2) is either related to tourism and motivation (n=1) or space planning of vans and other atypical homes (n=1). Although connected to vanlife, tourism is not a focus of this thesis, although it may be included as a topic of motivation for some subjects. Additionally, this study focuses on vehicle dwellers, but does not discriminate depending on the type of vehicles study participants reside in. Broadly, the focus of this study is analyzing the lifestyle choice of vanlife, and the interplay of motivations, identity, and national identity of Finnish individuals who have chosen to partake in it.

This literature review will first delve into Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Self-Determination, Identity-based Motivation, and Social Identity Theories as the bases for this thesis. The next sections will cover vanlife both in and outside of Finland generally and in connection with identity and/or motivation topics. The subsequent review on nomadism will follow the same format.

2.2 Motivation Theory

Motivations are a key point of interest of this study, as they can provide insight to push or pull factors individuals experience toward vanlife as a lifestyle. Vanlife is often described as a non-traditional, alternative lifestyle (May, 2022). Therefore, individuals taking on this lifestyle have chosen it on purpose and hence have motivations to enter which they may be self-aware of. These motivations have the potential to provide insight into the reasons for vanlife's popularity. Prabawa and Pertiwi (2020) define motivation as "a state of need, a condition which gives an individual impetus for some type of action which is seen as a possibility to bring satisfaction." Therefore, motivation theory can enable us to understand why certain individuals aim to seek satisfaction from entering alternative lifestyles like vanlife. Additionally, theory can bring further depth to discussions on how motivations develop and are sustained within vanlife, i.e., whether vanlife itself offers enough lasting satisfaction, or the lifestyle is used as a tool in new actions bringing further satisfaction.

The behavior of people is generally guided by various needs and desires that create motivation for action (Aittamaa, 2022 and Maslow, 1943). In various motivation theories, the aim is to identify these needs and ways to satisfy them (ibid). When discussing motivations in academia, the most cited motivation theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, often surfaces (Maslow, 1943). Maslow's theory of motivation is based on the concept of a hierarchy of needs, which is often represented as a pyramid (ibid). According to Maslow (1943), people have different levels of needs, and they are motivated by the desire to satisfy those needs. The hierarchy of needs includes physiological needs (food, clothing, shelter), safety and security needs (physical protection), love, belonging, and social needs (association with others), esteem needs ("receiving acknowledgement from others"), and self-actualization needs ("the desire for accomplishment or to leave behind a legacy"), where the needs follow in order from most to least critical (Badubi, 2017; Maslow, 1943). According to Maslow, if the needs at the lowest level are not satisfied, they serve as behavior-guiding motivations. When these low-level needs are fulfilled, and therefore no longer motivate action, a person moves to the next unfulfilled level in the hierarchy (Maslow, 1943; Aittamaa, 2022).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs served as a base theory for Aittamaa's (2022) Bachelor's thesis focusing on motivations for vanlife among Finns. The study examined what "attracts people to vanlife and the motivations behind their decision to try this alternative lifestyle" (ibid). Aittamaa's results indicate that the desires and needs expressed by the interviewees fall into self-actualization, the highest level of Maslow's hierarchy. For the Finns included in the study, the self-actualization stage matched best with their desires to "explore the world and oneself [and] expand one's worldview" (Aittamaa, 2022). Although this may vary for vanlifers in other parts of the world due to different socio-economic situations or other need-altering circumstances, this was the result Aittamaa's study came to for Finnish vanlifers. In terms of Finnish vanlife motivation research, this study aims to expand on Aittamaa's research with a 5x larger sample size and discuss not only the motivations to enter vanlife, but also how those motivations change alongside the lifestyle. Additionally, this study builds on previous research by connecting motivation to research and theory on identity.

As the motivations of vanlife for Finns fall into the highest levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs according to previous research, this study will further focus on these higher levels of the hierarchy focused on psychological needs. Maslow (1943) and Martela (2020b) both endorse the pursuit of self-actualization by addressing fundamental psychological needs and striving for personal growth and fulfillment. The theories utilized for this include the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with its base in the Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) (Martela, 2020a and Martela 2020b). The BPNT "aims to identify three innate psychological needs that significantly impact human...well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness." In this theory, autonomy is a "sense of volition," where an individual feels they are the author of their own life and are able to endorse their own actions without feeling as they are "forced to do things" (Martela, 2020a). Competence in this theory "is about the sense of fulfilment we get from learning and getting better at something and the sense of mastery of being at the top of our game and getting things done" (ibid). Finally, relatedness is about "having deep, mutually caring relationships in one's life" (Martela, 2020a).

According to SDT, by satisfying these needs, humans can experience greater well-being, intrinsic motivation, vitality, meaningfulness in life, and become more energized and engaged (Martela, 2020a and Martela, 2020b). However, a "chronic frustration of these needs has been shown to hurt our motivation, leading to deviance, depression, and other psychological ill-adjustments" (Martela, 2020a). SDT assumes that "humans are inherently curious, self-motivated, and growth-oriented beings who actively self-regulate their lives toward growth and integrity, guided by their internal motives, goals, and values" (Martela, 2020a and Martela, 2020b). The theory also emphasizes that the "satisfaction or thwarting of these needs plays a crucial role in the development and sustainability of motivation" and that "external rewards and controlling environments can diminish intrinsic motivation" (ibid). The results of this study regarding motivation will be analyzed with these three basic psychological needs as the theoretical base, aiming to uncover a connection between the needs and the vanlife lifestyle for Finnish individuals.

2.3 Identity Theory

The second theoretical base of this thesis includes the concept of identity, specifically aiming to connect how one's identity may impact motivations for vanlife. Additionally, the study strives to seek out any commonalities between the identities of Finnish vanlifers and what might differentiate specifically Finnish vanlifers from those of other national identities.

Identity is loosely defined as the traits and qualities that differentiate a person from others (Fiedler, 2022). A part of identity, therefore, is dependent on "ascription, e.g. names, social or ethnic backgrounds," but also includes the "character or personality of an individual" and "psychological identification" (ibid). Identity undergoes construction, adaptation, and preservation through interactions with the "self and the environment," with the self serving as a significant influencer in its "own identity-shaping process" (Fiedler, 2022).

Identity-based Motivation Theory is utilized in this study to explain how identity and motivation behave together (Oyserman, 2015). In the theory, Oyserman (2015) discusses how various identity researchers strongly believe that "the self is both a product of situations and a shaper of behavior in situations," and that which specific "identities come to mind and what they mean are dynamically constructed in context" (p. 2). Recalling instances where one's behavior matches current self-descriptions highlights the malleability of the self, allowing individuals to provide supporting evidence for a wide range of identities or self-descriptions (ibid). Identities, therefore, are not stable or constant, up for edits based on the present situation, making their analysis difficult. Oyserman's (2015) theory on Identity-based Motivation suggests that:

"People interpret situations and difficulties in ways that are congruent with currently active identities and prefer identity-congruent to identity-incongruent actions. When action feels identity-congruent, experienced difficulty highlights that the behavior is important and meaningful. When action feels identity-incongruent, the same difficulty suggests that the behavior is pointless and 'not for people like me.'"

Perceived self-identity therefore impacts one's attitude towards certain actions, and the likelihood of a certain voluntary action to be chosen in the future. Although identity has an unstable and malleable nature, identity models in research consistently predict this very influence on behavior: "Selves and identities are predicted to influence what people are motivated to do, how they think and make sense of themselves and others, the actions they take, their feelings and ability to control or regulate themselves" (Oyserman 2015).

Oyserman (2015) argues that motivation is a result of identity, however, identities are also a product of the results of those motivations (i.e., an action or situation). When analyzing identities and motivations in this study, this interplay must be accounted for, especially for those participants who have had ample time to settle into a possible new identity as a result of their change in lifestyle.

A lifestyle change also indicates a potential change in group identity, which according to Fiedler (2022), is a part of the full picture of an individual's identity. Tajfel and Turner (1979) define that social identity is a "person's sense of who they are" derived from their group membership(s)." According to Mcleod (2023), this social identification occurs when "individuals categorize themselves as members of a particular group" and in turn "adopt the identity of that group" including any common traits and "norms, values, and behaviors." Social Identity Theory (SID) argues the opposite, that humans "tend to categorize [themselves] and others into groups based on shared characteristics" (Bergstrom, 2019). However, Bergstrom (2019) also agrees that the identity of an individual is created "through social interactions," but these interactions also sustain identity. Within group or social identity, there also occurs the interaction of identity impacting group choice, but conversely the chosen group impacting one's identity.

As a larger category, national identity, although also malleable, tends to stay more constant than other aspects of identity as it often is not similarly chosen to other social groups (Mclead, 2023 and Fiedler, 2022). Associating identity with a location connects an individual's feelings and experiences with that specific place, and "through sharing a specific place as their home, humans are also identifying with other individuals that are tied to this same place" (Fiedler, 2022). As a larger concept, national identity "is not only shaped by members of the ingroup and their shared values, but also by...the outgroup...as it is due to this highlighted differentiation to others, that a concept like (national) identity

can exist” (Fiedler, 2022). With individuals from the same location, national identity has strong potential to shape an individual’s identity, which previously was found to influence motivation. Therefore, national identity can also impact motivation and actions, such as making a new lifestyle choice. These connecting concepts will be utilized to analyze the interplay of various motivations and identities of participants in this study.

The benefit individuals receive from these various group identifications is valuable to evaluate. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), “Social identity groups can give you a sense of belonging... [feelings of connection, unity, and relatedness to their experiences], ...purpose [common objectives offering guidance and purpose], ...self-worth [enhance self-esteem through group accomplishments and positive image], ... [and, as previously stated] identity [one can grow their identity as derived from the characteristics found in the group and the group frame aids individuals in understanding themselves].” These benefits group membership enables for an individual provide attractive reasons for joining. This study will further evaluate the social identity of both vanlife (among Finns, if not recognized, among broader vanlife) and national identity of Finland (as described and self-identified by vanlifers) and determine any connection to these benefits or impact on the individual identities of participants.

2.4 Vanlife

Vanlife is the main focus of this study, and hence the literature review. The term will be defined, and existing literature on the topic will be analyzed in this section. Topics covered include definitions, presence on social media, existing research on the topic related to motivation or identity, and vanlife’s connection to nomadism. Literature on Finns participating in the alternative lifestyle will be included wherever applicable. The aim of this section is to outline the current discourse on vanlife to supplement the background for this study.

2.4.1 Defining Vanlife

In current research, vanlife is defined as a growing alternative lifestyle movement associated with its own distinct subculture (Bergstrom, 2019; DiGiorno, 2020; Aittamaa,

2022; Dorn, 2015; Wilson and Hannam, 2022; Rizvi, 2021). Vanlife is the manifestation of “modern nomadic life” (Wichtmann et al., 2022; Pietsch, 2021), and some may even define the vanlife community as “countercultural” (Dorn, 2015). The perception of vanlife as a countercultural movement may be reflected from the roots of the lifestyle. The concept of vanlife goes back to the 1960’s, when hippies found living in vehicles a viable lifestyle choice (Aittamaa, 2022). Additionally, traditions of what echo modern vanlife go back in history in various parts of the world (Dooley, 2020; Wegerer, 2021). These include various groups of van dwelling nomads in Australia and the US, as well as the traditional vacation practice of recreational vehicle (RV) travel predominantly popular throughout North America and Europe (ibid). These varied instances of vehicle-life have provided a basis for this growth of the modern concept of vanlife, which in 2021 had an estimated 3 million participants in North America alone (Rizvi, 2021).

More plainly, and throughout its history, vanlife is and has been about people living in vans, although the vehicle type and even the length of stay are greatly debated upon (Myllykoski, 2023). The strictest definitions of vanlife involve living full-time and traveling long-distance in a self-converted van while “wild camping” (parking away from campgrounds or facilities) without another place of residence (Lindfelt, 2021; May, 2022; Gretzel and Hardy, 2019). On the other side, the loosest of vanlife definitions describe residing in any vehicle (i.e., car, van, motorhome, RV, bus) anywhere, and for any amount of time, even for a short vacation (Wichtmann et al., 2022; Bergstrom, 2019; Whaley and Abbot, 2022; Suzuki et al., 2023). Various definitions fall in between these two extremes (ibid). However, each definition includes the commonality of traveling while inhabiting a road vehicle.

These definitions aside, the individual’s choice to live a certain way is at the forefront of the movement. Pakkala (2023) highlights that some *choose* to live vanlife as a more permanent lifestyle. Wegerer (2021) describes the amount of choice one has with a vehicle equipped to be lived in; one can take “spontaneous weekend trips, holiday trips, or [utilize the vehicle] as a temporal, mobile home base for nomadic vanlife episodes.” The vehicle and concept of travel allow for various types of ‘vanlife’ an individual can choose to fit their situation and preferences the best. Vanlife merely presents a travel concept, which can be realized in a multitude of ways.

For the purposes of this study, the loosest definition will be used to define vanlife, respecting both the individual's choice on how to live the lifestyle and whether to relate to the term or not. This choice is due to the fact that vanlife among Finns is still an emerging trend, and this definition gives the most flexibility for its direction among this unique group and minimizes the risk of exclusion of valuable subjects.

Vanlife, although seen from the outside as a simple lifestyle, is not a simple term. The term remains complex with various nuances and opinions of the term's borders. The following sections will uncover more complexities found within the lifestyle.

2.4.2 Current Discourse in Finland

As this study focuses on Finns participating in vanlife, various forms of Finnish discourse surrounding the topic provide valuable insights for the research ahead. Academic literature on vanlife among Finns is minimal with only two academic studies. Therefore, news and media sources about Finns participating in vanlife will be utilized as auxiliary sources of data for the group. These studies conducted previously in Finland will be included in the following sections where previous research is available and applicable, always mentioning the research's relation to Finns in the text. Other literature included is from a wider scope geographically, mainly from North America and Europe. These locations have experienced major growth in vanlife and have had long-standing traditions of recreational vehicle travel (Wegerer, 2021). These sources will be used to supplement the review where research on Finns is lacking. The goal of this research is to fill these research gaps and expand on current vanlife discourse with the focus on Finns.

The following studies are worthy to be mentioned, with vanlife research in Finland or among Finns:

Aittamaa (2022) researched six Finnish individuals living vanlife either part-time or full-time in a Bachelor's level thesis, with the scope of push and pull factors of vanlife and general motivations for these Finns. Additionally, the research touches on the vanlife community, describes the average Finnish vanlifer, and overviews the lifestyle in general (ibid). This research is limited in its size and scope, which this study aims to expand.

Lindfelt's (2021) Master's thesis research is based in architecture and space planning, focusing on various kinds of small homes including vans. Although the thesis looks at "atypical dwellings" from varying locations, the research is brought back to the Finnish environment and analyzed through its specificities (ibid). These include the Finnish "criteria of accommodation" (as the subjects chosen do not meet these) and the change of the idea of 'home' (Lindfelt, 2021).

These two studies, although different, provide limited but valuable insight into the discourse on the budding topic of vanlife in Finland.

News articles about Finns and vanlife are more abundant. Popular Finnish news sites (such as YLE, Helsingin Uutiset, Iltalehti, Iltasanomat, MeNaiset) have written various articles regarding vanlife. (Kun, 2023; Hakaniemi, 2020; Makkula, 2023; Nousiainen, 2022; Ylöstalo-Kilpeläinen, 2023; Halonen, 2023; Myllykoski, 2023; Hakulinen, 2023; Leppänen, 2022; Vilen, 2023; Mynttinen, 2023). The most frequent articles feature personal stories of Finnish couples or individuals living in various vehicles (ibid). The frequency of these kinds of articles from various news sources illustrates the growth and hype of vanlife in Finland.

One news article in particular differs from these personal stories and discusses the greater trend of vanlife in Finland, uncovering key statistics alluding to the attitudes of Finns. In research by Pakkala (2023) through the Finnish news, 68.7% of over 5000 respondents have considered purchasing any kind of recreational vehicle. As for the type of vehicle, 48.1% of nearly 7000 respondents chose a converted van fit for travel. Other choices included car or tent (6.6%), luxury RV (29.9%), or easily movable trailer (15.4%) (ibid). The Covid-19 pandemic caused huge growth in the industry in Finland, which has yet to decline (Pakkala, 2023). In 2023, there were a total of 130.700 recreational vehicles in the Finnish registry, more than ever before (ibid). The article also discussed how the older Finnish population looks for a ready, new package when deciding on a vehicle to travel in, while younger individuals tend to go for used vehicles needing renovation (Pakkala, 2023). For these younger individuals, creating a space that appeals to them through various design elements (paint, textiles, lights, etc.) is increasingly important; they are creating their own

“nest” according to the article (ibid). Based on these statistics and prevalence in Finnish news, there seems to be legitimate interest in vanlife among Finnish consumers.

Vanlife has also been recently present in Finnish TV (Myllykoski, 2023). Huilaja’s (2023) mini documentary-series *Van Life* on YLE Areena follows her own routines and travels in a van, meeting other individuals following a similar lifestyle on the way. This series brought the concept of vanlife more strongly to Finnish homes, especially due to its availability on the nation’s biggest public TV channel.

Social media is also a highly relevant channel for vanlife discourse among Finns, but also largely impacts the movement as a whole. The following section will cover the relationship of vanlife to social media, also including Finnish content.

2.4.3 Vanlife and Social Media

The term ‘vanlife’ emerged in 2011 with Foster Huntington documenting his journey of leaving his job and “detaching from society” on social media (Dorn, 2015). Although the concept predates Huntington’s story, he popularized the term and has been credited to kickstarting the spike in the movement’s growth (ibid). Today, according to May (2022), ‘vanlife’ is used to “denote images and videos that represent a lifestyle” on social media. The term appears to be an over encompassing theme more than a specific term, based on its social media use (ibid).

Posting about vanlife on social media seems to perpetuate its growth, as is common with various other trends (Rizvi, 2021). Rizvi (2021) argues that although many subcultures grow in popularity with the help of social media, but that vanlife in itself is “driven by social media.” Dorn (2015) counters that social media, namely Instagram, has had an “important role” in vanlife’s development, but is not fully controlled by it. Nevertheless, vanlife spreading on social media has had a great impact on the trajectory of the trend (Aittamaa, 2022).

On social media, this growth is visible. In March of 2024, there were 16.2 million posts tagged #vanlife on Instagram, and 19.8 billion views under the same hashtag on TikTok

(Instagram, 2024; TikTok, 2024). The most relevant hashtags unique to Finland for the lifestyle include #pakuelämä (direct translation of vanlife), #vanlifesuomi (vanlife Finland), and #vanlifefinland (Instagram, 2024; TikTok, 2024). In the same period, #pakuelämää had 1000+ posts tagged on Instagram, and 13.2 million views on TikTok, while #vanlifesuomi and #vanlifefinland had 5000+ posts tagged on Instagram each, and 10.5 million views on TikTok total (Instagram, 2024; TikTok, 2024). According to Aittamaa (2022), and validating the relevance of social media to vanlife, the majority of Finns who become interested in the lifestyle have found the lifestyle on social media.

For Vanlife participants, social media provides a way to document their life, share experiences with a larger audience, earn money, connect with other vanlifers, and build community around the lifestyle (Lindfelt, 2021; Wichtmann et al., 2022; Dorn, 2015; Gretzel and Hardy, 2019; Aittamaa, 2022; Rizvi, 2021). What makes vanlifers different from the everyday social media user is their participation in building this #vanlife community, or, as Gretzel and Hardy (2019) describe it, an “imagined tribe.” This community “connects via Instagram” more frequently than in real life (ibid). Contributing to or connecting oneself to these “#vanlife-related hashtags makes it clear that these Instagrammers want to affiliate their posts with the #vanlife hashtag and its variants to become part of this online tribe.” (Gretzel and Hardy, 2019). These tags identify members of the community to one another through self-identification.

Although the definitions of vanlife are often wider, the story on social media shows a clear separation. Gretzel and Hardy (2019) discuss how “Only 98 (4.2%) of the hashtags pertain to RVing/Camping, suggesting that #vanlife is indeed a separate travel style.” Further, “only two hashtags mention campgrounds, indicating that they play an insignificant role in #vanlife activities and culture.” (ibid). #Vanlife could be utilized as merely a new media-hyped word used for the age-old travel style of recreational vehicles. However, as discussed above, the practicalities and online nature of the community vary greatly from the former, making the phenomena a unique mode of life in the modern day.

2.4.4 Vanlife Motivations

The reasons behind the growth of vanlife can only be uncovered through understanding the various push and pull factors or motivations people have for pursuing the lifestyle. Some vanlifers are motivated by only one factor, while others by various, yet all indicate interest to pursue vanlife.

Firstly, many are keen to enter the lifestyle to pursue freedom, simplicity of life, self-sufficiency, and connectedness to nature (May, 2022; Wichtmann et al., 2022; Aittamaa, 2022; Fiedler, 2022; Lindfelt, 2021; Alsenmyr, 2021). Additionally, motivators include the desire for adventure, new experiences, and travel which is free, simple, authentic, and connected to everyday life (Wichtmann et al., 2022; Aittamaa, 2022; DiGiorno, 2020; Wegerer, 2021; May, 2022). Others enter vanlife to escape everyday life, gain independence from society or societal pressures, and as a result have the freedom and flexibility to design their own life (Wichtmann et al., 2022; Wilson and Hannam, 2022; May, 2022; Aittamaa, 2022; DiGiorno, 2020; Wegerer, 2021). These larger themes are often associated with the term ‘vanlife,’ therefore they are often apparent for individuals interested in the lifestyle (ibid).

Financial freedom and the general affordability of the lifestyle are also strong pull factors for participants into the lifestyle (Hakaniemi, 2020; Aittamaa, 2022; Lindfelt, 2021; Alsenmyr, 2021). Due to the affordability factor, some participants may even be pushed into vanlife due to socio-economic pressures i.e., by high costs of living (Rizvi, 2021; Pietsch, 2021; DiGiorno, 2020). Vanlife, however affordable, is not free. To fund the lifestyle, many participants make use of the growing selection of digital, remote work opportunities, or have mobile careers, i.e., traveling from place to place after gigs (Aittamaa, 2022; Rizvi, 2021; Pietsch, 2021; DiGiorno, 2020). Some even make a living through sharing their lifestyle on blogs or social media (Lindfelt, 2021). These “non-traditional work modalities” grant vanlifers flexibility, and therefore high mobility with their home (Rizvi, 2021; Gretzel and Hardy, 2019; Alsenmyr, 2021; Aittamaa, 2022). Individuals may be motivated to enter vanlife if their work already is able to be combined with the lifestyle. Others may be motivated to enter due to “a rejection of traditional societal norms such as a nine-to-five office job.” (May, 2022). The mode and type of work

in which the individual participates, as well as their attitude towards it, also greatly impacts whether work as a topic is a push or pull factor for participating in vanlife.

Vanlifer's "willingness to part with material things" is another factor enabling their mobility apart from their way to make a living on the road (Gretzel and Hardy, 2019). Minimalism is a core value and trait of many vanlifers, both in terms of material things as well as reducing their "resource- and energy consumption," which connects to vanlife due to it being a "simpler dwelling" (Alsenmyr, 2021; May, 2022; Dorn, 2015; Lindfelt, 2021). Therefore, vanlife may appeal to those motivated to create a simpler life and consume less (ibid). Lindfelt (2021) also points out that people are increasingly interested in "collecting" experiences over items, and this often is realized through travel. Due to the minimalistic, digital, and highly mobile nature of vanlife, the lifestyle tends to challenge "traditional notions of home and work" which some individuals may seek (Dorn, 2015; Wegerer, 2021). Vanlife has transformed home and work to suit the lifestyle, making it a viable alternative for those who are motivated to make the change. Overall, vanlife as a mobile lifestyle offers the possibility to have a better use of time, considering what one prioritizes in life (Lindfelt, 2021).

As stated previously, vanlifers are often motivated by the sum of a selection of motivators, the most common of which are described above (Lindfelt, 2021). However, what does this selection of vanlife motivators look like for Finns, based on previous research? Do they differ from wider research on vanlife motivations outlined above in this section?

Firstly, it is important to consider that Finland has a so-called "societal safety-net," ensuring everyone a basic standard of living and shelter, especially in times of adversity (Lindfelt, 2021). Lindfelt (2021) also emphasizes, that although this precedent exists in Finland, one can freely decide to live in housing which does not fulfill the requirements set by the government, such as a mobile vehicle. In Finland, the average renter uses on average over a fourth of their net income on rent (as compared to one tenth for homeowners) (ibid). With such high living costs in Finland, many may choose a lifestyle such as vanlife as an option to reduce their spending. By understanding the situation of the Finnish living environment, the understanding of the motivations of Finns towards vanlife can be better understood.

Research among Finnish vanlifers contains many similar themes regarding motivations to the broader vanlife motivation discourse. Aittamaa (2022) uncovered the top themes of motivation among Finnish vanlifers to be: A desire to be close to nature, to be able to explore different places with time, and to gain an understanding of the surrounding world. Additionally, motivators brought up in interviews included a need to escape routines and the hustle and bustle of everyday life, a longing for freedom and variation in daily life, and the integration of a mobile lifestyle with homely living (ibid). The strongest motivations the research uncovered were the escape from the daily routine environment as well as self-exploration and -assessment (Aittamaa, 2022). The core reason Finnish vanlifers proceeded to stay in the lifestyle was their desire to live a kind of life which they build for themselves and suits their priorities (ibid). As stated previously, according to Aittamaa (2022), the human needs assessed in her research which vanlife fulfills land in the highest, self-actualization stage of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. Aittamaa (2022) justifies, that the desire to travel and learn about oneself and the world are strongly associated with needs of self-actualization. These motivations and analyzes of vanlife experiences provide a basis for further exploration into Finn's relationships with vanlife.

2.4.5 Vanlife and Identity

Much like vanlife and motivation, vanlife and identity have a two-way connection, influencing each other through various facets. Firstly, vanlife is cited as a method to perform or express identity. Fiedler (2022) describes an instance where the "freedom of self-actualization" which vanlife offers, enables, and motivates participants to "negotiate" their identities. As an example, "Tim identifies vanlife as a possibility to express his close relationship to nature as part of his identity" (Fiedler, 2022). More broadly, a study by Wichtmann et al., (2022) found that individuals agree the type of travel they participate in is connected to "the kind of person they are" and that travel has to do with the factor of "identity demonstration." Travel is innately a part of vanlife, hence this connection to identity can be extended to also vanlife.

On the other hand, vanlife is a way to discover oneself and construct identity. Cited also as a motivation to enter vanlife, the resulting self-development participants experience from travel "broaden[s] the mind" (May, 2022). Through "gaining understandings about new

cultures and places, [travelers] often more importantly gain understandings about themselves” and experience an “augmentation of their personal identity” (May, 2022). Wilson and Hannam (2017) go beyond the impact of travel and describe the campervans themselves as “fragment[s] of material culture” which act as an expression of identity for the individuals residing in them. But where does this expression take place? Bergstrom (2019) connects that this “formation and performance of one’s identity takes place in an online environment more frequently.” The strong connection of vanlife to social media adds another level of complexity to identity expression and construction through the means of vanlife.

As vanlifers are often location independent and are spread through geographical locations globally, a type of group identity also manifests in these online environments (Mohabeer, 2021). As stated previously, the vanlife culture has developed its “own subculture” among the otherwise diverse group of people (Wilson and Hannam, 2022; Dorn, 2015). For these vanlifers, social media serves as a location to grow this subculture through “document[ing] their experiences on social media using a common visual grammar, creating a sense of community and shared identity.” (May, 2022). Bergstrom (2019) adds, that:

“Vanlife is an identity that is created and maintained through social interactions...People who identify as part of the vanlife community often share a set of values and beliefs, such as a desire for freedom, adventure, and simplicity. They also often share a love for nature, outdoor activities, and sustainable living. By participating in vanlife, individuals can create a sense of belonging and connection with others who share these values and beliefs, and this can contribute to the formation of a shared identity.”

Gretzel and Hardy (2019) describe this online community as a “tribe,” and individuals join through “affiliat[ing] their posts” with the tribe’s hashtags, such as #vanlife and connecting with others under it. Alsenmyr (2021), however, points out that this vanlife identity group also involves an “outgroup,” in that “vanlifers don’t want to be confused with people living at traditional camping grounds” and avoid hashtags pertaining to the outgroup. Online environments therefore are central to not only growth, but determination of the limits of the vanlife identity.

Despite location independence and the online nature of vanlife identity-forming, smaller subgroups within this shared vanlife community identity exist in the form of the base culture or mother language of participants. In the case of this study, that is Finland and Finnish. According to Finnish source Pakkala (2023), “the essence [of vanlife] lies in community” and friendships are formed through sharing stories of life on the road in the Finnish environment. Aittamaa’s (2022) research provides two angles. Some participants in the study did not experience an automatic feeling community with other vanlife participants, while some reported “getting to know others, keeping in contact, and even developing friendships through the lifestyle (ibid). Aittamaa (2022) also found that the feeling of community on social media is more prevalent than in real life among Finnish vanlifers. Participants noted that nationality plays a role in vanlife community, stating that “Finnish vanlifers get to know each other more easily” (ibid). Although the Finnish vanlife community is small, Aittamaa (2022) specifies that the group is still very diverse, with various “backgrounds and interests,” which makes logistically finding like-minded people in real-life difficult, not to mention the geographical distances between participants. Hence, these connections are more easily found and built on social media (ibid).

Due to the diverse group of people found participating in the vanlife lifestyle globally, it is difficult to define the singular identity of a vanlifer, other than the themes described 2.4.1 *Defining Vanlife*. For Finnish vanlifers, despite also being reported to be diverse by Aittamaa (2022), research can more easily point to key identities pertaining to the group. According to Best Caravan, Finland’s largest van, camper, and RV provider, the scene has experienced a major influx of young people (Pakkala, 2023). Additionally, despite citing diversity of the group, Aittamaa (2022) describes the average Finnish vanlifer to be “independent travelers, who seek authentic experiences during their travels and can be very spontaneous when it comes to their travel plans.” Of course, identity is a multi-faceted element of an individual which relates to each section on vanlife described thus far. Vanlife definitions, motivations, and social media practices one relates with are also involved with their identity. However, to further analyze the discourse of Finnish vanlife with participant’s identity, these distinctions are necessary.

2.4.6 Connection to Nomadism

Vanlife is not a singular movement. While it has various distinguishable features as discussed above, it is not alone in the discourse of modern alternative lifestyles. How is vanlife related to similar lifestyles or movements which have become popular today?

As previously discussed, the concept of vanlife has its origins in 1960's hippie culture (Aittamaa, 2022). However, modern vanlifers differ from hippies in that they have the “contemporary ability to ‘work on the road’ and be a ‘digitally nomadic entrepreneur,’” instead of simply “free living in a van” as hippies largely did (Mohabeer, 2021; Aittamaa, 2022; May, 2022). The vast majority of research agrees that vanlife is a nomadic lifestyle, yet its connection to digital nomadism is more unclear (Wichtmann et al., 2022; Pietsch, 2021). Fiedler (2022) argues that vanlife is simply a form of digital nomadism, while Gretzel and Hardy (2019) distinguish there to be significant overlap of the two lifestyles. Woldoff and Litchfield (2021) simply state that digital nomadism is largely tied to work situations, and that some vanlifers can be described also as digital nomads, as not all are employed digitally. While vanlife and digital nomadism overlap, both terms cannot be used to describe an individual unequivocally.

Fiedler (2022) further differentiates the two lifestyles, stating that:

“In contrast to “traditional” digital nomads, the van diminishes almost any remaining dependence on public infrastructure, [transport] and accommodation and allows for a separated coexistence apart from the boundaries of society... [offering] a maximum level of both individual and spatial freedom.”

The only factors limiting vanlifers from the freedom of mobility are parking space and the working functions of the van (ibid). Although both lifestyles practice forms of nomadism, these factors are the clearest distinctions between the two. The next section will delve into digital nomadism with similar themes as discussed about vanlife to enrich the discussion and find comparisons in the parallel lifestyles.

2.5 Nomadism

Modern digital nomadism describes a parallel trend to vanlife according to Fiedler (2022). In this section, Nomadism's various forms will be defined, and existing literature on the topic will be analyzed in this section. Topics covered include definitions, research on Finns participating in the alternative lifestyle, and existing research on the topic related to motivation or identity. As various research outlined above argue a strong connection or overlap between the two movements, this section will outline nomadism and related modern terms to further strengthen the discussion on vanlife.

2.5.1 Defining Nomadism

Unlike vanlife, nomadism is not a recent trend, as the mode of life of traveling from place to place without a permanent home has been practiced throughout history, some research estimating as far back as 8500 BCE (Prabawa and Pertiwi, 2020; Aittamaa, 2021; Keskitalo, 2019). Nomadism has predominantly been present in hunter-gatherer societies which humankind practiced up until the invention of agriculture (Prabawa and Pertiwi, 2020). Although society has immensely changed since the first instances of nomadism, the core idea is still present in today's adaptations.

Modern nomadism, more commonly addressed as digital nomadism, also describes a lifestyle of location independence and frequent travel (Mouratidis, 2018, Aittamaa, 2022; Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017; Hall, G. et al., 2018). However, digital nomadism differs in that the movement is largely linked to the digital jobs of participants, enabling their mobility while blurring the boundary of work and leisure (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017; Aittamaa, 2022; Woldoff and Litchfield, 2021; Hall, G. et al., 2018; Mouratidis, 2018). Digital nomads are tech-savvy, often entrepreneurial and young remote knowledge workers who "use digital technologies to work wherever and whenever" (Hall, G. et al., 2018; Aittamaa, 2022; Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017; Woldoff and Litchfield, 2021; May, 2022). Sutherland and Jarrahi (2017) specify digital nomads' preference for flexible, project-based work through either self-employment or freelancing, allowing them the utmost "control over their work and schedule."

Working mindset is also an important distinguishing feature of digital nomads. With digital nomadism comes a certain voiced rejection of traditional office jobs (“the 9 to 5”) and the ideal of freedom in the ability to make a living traveling “without a clear destination.” (Mouratidis, 2018; Woldoff and Litchfield, 2021; Aittamaa, 2022). These notions reflect the original meanings of the term “nomad” or “nomadism,” which gained traction in the 1980’s initially reflecting “the conflict between state power and individual freedom” (Prabawa and Pertiwi, 2020). Modern technologies have enabled individuals to become less confined to locations and partake even more strongly in this countercultural movement of nomadism (Dooley, 2020; Mouratidis, 2018). Prabawa and Pertiwi (2020) highlight how digital nomads exemplify “a new fluidity in global life,” identifying strongly with high-mobility and travel “far and wide...moving as often as they like” (Woldoff and Litchfield, 2021; Mouratidis, 2018; Hall, G. et al., 2018).

2.5.2 Nomadism Among Finns

Nomadism and Digital Nomadism has been sparsely studied among Finns; hence the following sections will include research focused on various nationalities to provide a reliable literature base. However, these studies focused on Finns will be included when relevant research is available and where it is applicable in this review. These instances of research focused on Finns will be specifically stated in the text.

Nomadism in Finland has been mainly studied among the native Sámi people of northern Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Russia. (Keskitalo, 2019). Keskitalo (2019) highlights the Sámi’s “nomadic views of migration” and their history of nomadic reindeer herding. However, the Sámi have begun migrating “to urban centers,” much like other Finnish inhabitants already before the 1960’s. Core Sámi areas, however, are still present, but the traditions of nomadism have declined due to this migration (ibid). Although modern forms of nomadism differ from the reindeer herding Sámi, it is still important to highlight Finland’s and Finn’s connection to the topic of nomadism historically. In other words, nomadism in the Finnish environment is not a completely foreign topic.

Digital nomadism among Finns has been studied by Mathlouthi (2021), exploring how expectations of Finnish modern nomads and employers intersect and identifying factors

influencing the nomads' adaptation in the professional environment. Although the topics of this study pertain mainly to worklife, the research also highlights the motivations of the Finns interviewed to become digital nomads (ibid). As digital nomadism is found to have a strong link to vanlife, these findings can add to the research of Finns' motivations to live alternative, mobile lifestyles.

2.5.3 Motivations of Digital Nomads

According to various studies, the main source of motivation for digital nomads is to gain access to a sense of freedom in various aspects of their life, namely “professional freedom, spatial freedom, and personal freedom” (Fiedler, 2022; Hall, G. et al., 2018; Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017; Mouratidis, 2018). Freedom, flexibility, and control over these aspects of life is strongly valued by digital nomads, as is the “independence from societal constraints” or expectations (Fiedler, 2022; Hall, G. et al., 2018; Mouratidis, 2018). Hall G., et al. (2018) and Mouratidis (2018) also cite digital nomads to be motivated to enter the lifestyle in search of a better work-life balance. The core motivation and “source of happiness,” for digital nomads, however, is not a pull factor, but a push factor (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017). Digital nomads relentlessly cite escaping from the traditional 9-5 workday and “boring, [repetitive] office life” (ibid). As the digital nomad is mainly defined through their work, it correlates that their main source of motivation to enter the lifestyle is a change in their work arrangements.

In terms of other motivations, digital nomads are varied in their secondary responses (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017). The “opportunity to travel and experience new cultures...the potential for cost savings” and a call for adventure are also commonly expressed in research of digital nomad motivations (Hall, G. et al., 2018; Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017). As these motivations come to fruition through the lifestyle, the benefits help individuals maintain their version of digital nomadism.

Research specifically on Finns showcases a different motivation hierarchy. Mathlouthi's (2021) research highlights the most common motivation for Finnish digital nomads to be the desire to travel more, get to know new cultures, and to see the world. The research cites the already existing, excellent work-life balance in Finland, which may be a reason for this

discrepancy with broader digital nomadism research (ibid). Finns also desire increased freedom through location independent work and the ability to remove oneself as best as possible from the so-called “rat-race” of work. These motivations, however, come secondary in this research. Finns also are motivated by the potential for cost savings digital nomadism offers but describe the motivation as “financial freedom” instead (Mathlouthi, 2021). Finally, a unique motivation Finns included in their responses was to escape the darkness of the autumn and winter months through partaking in digital nomadism (ibid). These motivations provide useful insights to the discourse of why Finns specifically may be interested in entering alternative lifestyles such as digital nomadism or its cousin vanlife.

2.5.4 Identity of Digital Nomads

As stated previously by Bergstrom (2019), humans often group themselves and others based on existing or desired traits, or traits they want to avoid being connected with. The core of digital nomads’ identity is long-term travel while working, which Mouratidis (2018) argues is “what differentiates them from other long-term travel groups.” The latter is also true. Mouratidis (2018) highlights digital nomads’ “anti-touristic role” as a way the group maintains their unique identity. “Distanc[ing] themselves from tourists” enables digital nomads to further form their identities and create group values, such as these found by Mouratidis (2018): “we (digital nomads) search for authenticity, while they (tourists) seek excitement.” Aittamaa (2022) explores the opposite of the spectrum: “If digital nomads are not tourists, are they locals?” The research comes to the conclusion that “digital nomads occupy a space between tourists and locals, gaining the status of neither (ibid). It is no wonder digital nomads find it critical to create and maintain identity and associate with a “third, separate group”- the digital nomad community.

To maintain identity and grow community, the term ‘digital nomad’ itself has proved to be important. Sutherland and Jarrahi (2017) cite a “shared identity and under the banner of the term ‘digital nomad’” which is utilized also as a “self-description” for members. For digital nomads, there seems to be a particularly “strong appeal for establishing community identity” around the term itself (ibid). This could be due to the decentralized, hybrid nature of the community, almost similar to a more constant, national identity (although not tied to

one location) (Mouratidis, 2018; Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017; Fiedler, 2022). Further, Aittamaa (2022) discovers many digital nomads identify more as “citizens of the world, instead of finding national identity in one country.” Without a national identity, there may be a greater need for group identity, accentuated with the appeal towards the central term ‘digital nomad.’

The digital nomad community identity is further strengthened through the existence of websites, programs, forums, services, and locations (i.e., internet cafes, hostels) specifically designed for the digital nomad (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017). These various services and platforms further recognize the group (and the identity) while catering to their unique situation and needs (ibid). Additionally, they offer “access to a community not associated with an organization, but with a work situation” (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017). As work (specifically, the work mindset) is central to the digital nomad identity, it is natural that identity-growth is cultivated through it as well.

Overall, digital nomadism provides a valuable comparison to vanlife as a phenomenon. While the attributes, motivations, and identities of digital nomads differ to some extent from those of vanlifers, both are identified as alternative lifestyles experiencing recent growth, with their presence being strengthened by increasingly online means. How an emerging alternative lifestyle defines themselves, what motivated them to enter, and how identity plays a role in their journeys are all overlapping insights which both communities of vanlifers and digital nomads can offer to this research. This is especially true to those individuals, which in addition to sharing an alternative lifestyle, share a similar national identity.

2.6 Conclusion

This literature review serves as a basis for this study on vanlife among Finns. The topics of this literature review will be utilized to create a frame and provide a theoretical basis for the study. The topics covered include motivation and identity theories, most predominantly Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Self-Determination, Identity-based Motivation, and Social Identity Theories. Thereafter, existing literature on vanlife and digital nomadism are reviewed from perspectives of Finns, as well as existing discussions relating to motivation

and identity. This study aims to supplement existing research surrounding these topics and provide new research in connecting them further.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The overarching research aim of this study is to augment the academic discussion of Finns participating in vanlife through analyzing the discourse between current participant's various identities and motivations connected to the lifestyle. To achieve this aim, the study strives to answer the following research questions in depth:

1. What are Finns' core motivations for participating in the lifestyle and how do they change over time?
2. How does the identity of Finnish vanlifers connect to their lifestyle and motivations behind it?
3. How does Finnish identity impact how vanlife is motivated and experienced?

Additionally, a goal of the study is to uncover how vanlife is currently present and understood among Finns. These questions guided the entire duration of the study and acted as a basis for the development of the interview.

3.2 Research Method

3.2.1 Interview Process, Structure and Design

Ethnographic research is more about "learning from people" instead of "studying people," and is best conducted through natural interviews (Spradley, 2016). Hence, this type of interview was adopted for this study. Natural interviews allow vanlife research on Finns to be very ground level and provide participants with the necessary definitions and structure to avoid misinterpretations. Semi-structured interviews (SSI) specifically were selected for

this study as the primary method of data collection as they provide a suitable format for in-depth conversation around a certain topic. SSIs maintain the flow of the conversation and have the allowance for unexpected insights through the freedom to delve into topics parallel to the interview (Kakilla, 2021). Due to the “generative nature” of SSIs, new ideas, connections, and questions are often inspired as a result of the freer format as compared to structured interviews (ibid). More broadly, using an interview as a format of data collection enables the researcher to not only gather verbal responses, but also notice and analyze non-verbal cues from participants such as laughter or tone to further supplement the research (ibid).

For this study, interviews were conducted in three different ways, according to the preference of the participant and based on limiting factors such as internet connection or physical distance between interviewer and interviewee. In-person interviews were requested, if possible, but only three participants opted for this type. Three participants opted for a phone call interview, and the remaining fourteen participants opted for a Zoom interview, where only one decided to keep the camera off for the duration of the interview. The interviewer kept the camera on for the entire duration of all Zoom interviews.

As for ethical considerations, each interview began with a pledge of confidentiality and an inquiry of consent from the participant. Additionally, the participant was asked if they had any questions prior to beginning the interview. More specific wording can be found in *Appendix I* prior to the interview questions. After the initial statement of consent and confidentiality, the interviewer described the study and their connection to the topic. As the interviewer shares the vanlife lifestyle, it was beneficial to mention as this may have allowed interviewees to feel more connected to the interviewer and therefore describe their thoughts in more depth due to this shared understanding of the topic established at the beginning. The following interview structure consisted of three sections to guide the discussion: Basics (personal data, description of personal lifestyle, opinions on various definitions, etc.), Motivation (motivations to enter vanlife, changes in motivation, etc.), Identity (personal identity, national identity, connection of both to vanlife, etc.), and Methods (inquiry for potential interview participants, questions). The exact question lists within this structure can be found also in *Appendix I*. To ensure sufficient consistency and standardization for comparative analysis, this four-section structure was followed in the

case of each interview, although the questions and their order within the sections developed through the pilot interviews, upon suggestions from interviewees, and by the researcher for optimizing flow and understanding as more interviews were conducted. The largest change in interview questions occurred in the “Identity / Finnishness” section, as there was friction with identifying with a Finnish national identity. To broaden the question to those individuals experiencing friction, the question was changed from “Is there something about your Finnish identity that you think could impact your way of experiencing this lifestyle or motivating you to enter it?” To “Do you feel that there is something within your identity that you can attribute to growing up in Finland or from living in Finnish society that you think could impact your way of experiencing this lifestyle or motivating you to enter it?” Other changes to the interview are displayed in detail in *Appendix I* with the key following each interview.

Two pilot interviews were conducted with fellow students to further develop the interview structure and improve the understanding of the questions prior to the study. Based on feedback, personal questions were broadened to allow for more flexibility in responses, assumptions (i.e., assuming a connection of identity and vanlife) were minimized from wordings, and grammatical errors were corrected as a result of the pilot interviews.

All interview inquiries, pre-interview coordination, and the interviews themselves were conducted in Finnish (Finnish interview inquiries, SSI questions, as well as translations for each element to English are provided in *Appendix I*). All participants chose Finnish as the language for the interview (from the options of Finnish or English stated in the interview inquiry) and Finnish provided the best language for communication regarding the topic of Finns participating in vanlife. Additionally, the study aimed to identify any specific terminology Finnish vanlifers use about their lifestyle, as well as about their personal and national identities in their mother tongue (or second language in case of Swedish speaking Finns included in this study). Therefore, Finnish provided the best language to conduct the discussion to uncover these terms. As language is often connected to national identity, Finnish provided the perfect language to also discuss with Finns about Finnish identity.

The average interview session length was ~57 minutes with little variability, although the in-person interviews stretched far beyond the recording time due to common interest in the

topics discussed in the interview. Each session began with the interview and recording to avoid any impact of the casual discussions on the responses given in the interview itself. Post-interview, more casual discussions continued in some cases. The contents of these discussions were not included in the interview recordings and are not included in this study. In all cases, interviews were recorded using the Voice Memo app on an iPhone. Post interview, these recordings were uploaded onto the secure Aalto OneDrive and permanently deleted from the iPhone to ensure data security and confidentiality.

3.2.3 Sampling Procedure & Participants

The study reached its target of 20 participants, after which sampling was concluded. Out of these 20 participants, 9 (45%) were identified through the media, advertising, and active social media presence associated with the Caravan Fair Event in Lahti in September 2023 which included a heightened influence of vanlife as well as hosted a “Finnish vanlife meetup” following the event. 4 (20%) of the study’s participants were found through various Finnish news sources. The researcher’s personal connection to the vanlife lifestyle in Finland prompted active and frequent discussions in various circles, resulting in 3 (15%) of the study’s participants to be connected through friends or colleagues. Participants found through Instagram included 2 individuals (10%), which were found using the Finnish or Finland-related hashtags discussed in section 2.4.3 *Vanlife and Social Media* of the Literature Review above (#pakuelämä, #vanlifesuomi, #vanlifefinland). Snowball sampling resulted in 2 participants (10%), one through a connection from a previous interviewee, and one through a Finnish Vanlife -WhatsApp group, which a previous interviewee added the researcher to. Based on the interview inquiry posted in this group, one participant volunteered to be included in the study.

Despite the original effort to conduct snowball sampling, only 5-10% of the resulting sample (depending on definition of snowball sampling) was reached through this sampling method. Briefly, snowball sampling was initially chosen for this research mainly due to convenience and lack of a central participant network to contact members from (i.e., with a random sample). Additionally, due to shared contacts, there may be more likelihood for interview acceptance from potential participants (Parker, et al., 2019). The idea of the snowball sample was to enable the researcher to have a valid sampling method without

massive volume and causing bias through hand-picking from a group (ibid). The resulting sample came about more through purposive sampling.

Purposive sampling (or judgement sampling) is also a type of non-probability sampling often used in qualitative research like snowball sampling, however, it “involves the researcher using their expertise to select a sample that is most useful to the purposes of the research.” As the researcher has first-hand knowledge and experience with the phenomenon of vanlife in Finland, this is deemed as expertise in the case of this study. This study is supported by this sampling method, as it allows the researcher to “gain detailed knowledge” about a topic, i.e., vanlife in Finland, in a case “where the population is very small and specific,” as it is in this research (McCombes, 2023).

An interview inquiry was sent to a total of 32 individuals, with a success rate (interview conducted) of 62.5%. Only one participant directly responded that they would not like to participate, 4 (12.5%) yielded no response, and 7 (21.9%) responded either late (cap of 20 interviews had already been reached) or the individual did not continue the conversation to the researcher’s reply after their initial positive response. There was no definitive correlation between connection to individual, channel of contact, and/or resulting response. The only exception to this was that individuals found on TikTok (and contacted through Instagram) proved unsuccessful each time (3 inquiries, or 9.4%). Email inquiries were initially prioritized; however, emails were rarely available through social profiles and inquiries through Instagram direct messages generally provided faster responses. Based on interviews conducted, inquiries were sent through Instagram (14 or 70%), email (4 or 20%), phone call (1 or 5%), and WhatsApp (1 or 5%).

Due to the group of Finnish vanlifers being so small, there were various methods for sampling and multiple channels of contact. This multi-faceted method can still be considered reliable as the total population of vanlifers in Finland (even when including those who participate in the lifestyle part-time) is relatively small. To be able to get as much of a response as possible and interview a significant sample, every lead from a variety of sources was evaluated for relevance and contacted through the method which seemed most appropriate in each case to ensure the highest likelihood of a response.

The exclusion/inclusion criteria for the participants evolved as interviews went on. Initially, the study prioritized Finnish vanlifers living full-time in their vehicles. However, as the study's definition of vanlife developed (see section 2.4.1 *Defining Vanlife*), the small size of the group was understood, and the difficulty to find or receive responses from individuals belonging to this group concretized, changes to this criterion were made. As a result of these factors, the study opted to broaden its scope to part-time and full-time Finnish vanlife participants to achieve the goal of 20 total participants. Please note, although the term 'vanlife' is used here frequently with this study's own definition, interview inquiries specifically asked for individuals living part or full-time in vehicles to minimize misunderstandings due to the varied conceptions of vanlife. Even those not relating to the term of vanlife would still be included in the study, so long as they claim to fit this study's loose definition of the term. This simple inclusion and exclusion criteria provided the clarity required to have an effective purposive sample and enable reliable analysis across participants. In terms of Finnish identity, from the beginning, all vanlifers who had no clear connection to Finland were excluded from the study. This was determined based on the response to the interview inquiry (found in *Appendix I*). Although a few individuals participating in the study had some friction identifying with a Finnish national identity, each participant agreed to the interview on the basis of having a strong connection to Finland.

Participants of this study were extremely varied in age, travel companions, occupation, as well as their history and current relationship with vanlife. Due to the limited amount of Finnish vanlifers in the community, specific demographic information (i.e., educational background, specific occupation, gender, etc.) have been omitted from the study to maintain anonymity for those who belong to outlier groups of an already small population. The ages of participants ranged from late-20s to early 60s. A few participants were not asked for their age due to researcher error and a few declined to answer, hence no average. 60% (12) of participants travelled with a partner, and 65% (13) travelled with pets. As for occupation, 10% (2) of participants were retired, 15% (3) had an in-person job, 35% (7) were entrepreneurs, 20% (4) had a remote job, 15% (3) had a partly remote job, and 5% (1) was a student. Participants had experience living in their vehicles for an average of 2 years and 7 months, with a range of 1 month to 8 years. With every participant's time added together, the total vanlife experience interviewed for this study comes to just under 52

years. As for the type of lifestyle, 65% (13) of participants lived in their vehicle full time, 10% (2) had experience of full-time vanlife in the past and have since transitioned to part-time vanlife, 15% (3) lived in their vehicle part-time, and 10% (2) had left a full-time vanlife lifestyle to reside in houses. Out of all participants, 65% lived in self-converted vehicles, while 35% (7) in factory-made RVs or campers (many with self-made modifications). Overall, the diversity of the research participants confirmed the sampling to be sufficiently effective in understanding the population of the Finnish vanlife community. Some exceptions apply and are discussed below in section 3.4 *Trustworthiness and Quality of Study*.

3.3 Data Management and Analysis

For the data management of this study, various basic Microsoft apps were used. Microsoft Excel was used to organize potential participants based on relevance to the study and to categorize any available, relevant information on them. Microsoft Word was used for generating interview transcripts (Finnish .M4a Recordings to Finnish text). These transcripts included the entirety of the interview recordings and were manually cross-checked post-transcription with the initial recording. Excel was once again used for the manual coding process organization while thematically coding the interview transcripts. The interviews recordings were listened to again for the coding process and those results organized in various spreadsheets. Lastly, Google Translate and ChatGPT were used for translation guidance from Finnish to English where applicable.

3.4 Trustworthiness and Quality of Study

A core aim of this study was to uphold credibility, trustworthiness, and validity of the collected data. To ensure this, various steps were taken. Firstly, and as previously stated, detailed documentation was prioritized as transcripts were reviewed for correctness by cross-checking the interview recording by hand. Secondly, attention was taken to use similar tone and wording when asking participants interview questions to avoid variability in understanding. Finally, each interview began with a personal note from the interviewer, connecting to the vanlife topic at hand. This was an attempt at building rapport and trust

with participants to encourage honesty and openness in responses, thus improving the validity of the data.

The different interview methods (phone, Zoom, face-to-face) might have caused some discrepancies in the environment and connection between the interviewer and the interviewee, hence impacting the depth or content of some responses. This variability might have influenced the interview process and the resulting data, as well as its interpretation.

Additionally, by sampling and connecting with participants primarily through Instagram, this specific group of Finnish vanlifers who use the platform might be overrepresented in the sample. Not all participants in Finnish vanlife use Instagram, and hence those who do might have certain biases which are perpetuated by social media. These individuals might also connect to the broader identity or community of vanlife as presented on social media (see section 2.4.3 *Vanlife and Social Media*) and therefore understanding their take on purely Finnish vanlife might be skewed due to the content they consume and identify with on Instagram. However, without Instagram, this study would have proved to be extremely difficult. Based on this research, Instagram has become the main contact channel for this community also in Finland.

As for present biases, the most important ones include observer bias as well as experience bias. Observer bias is a risk in purposive (judgement) sampling, as the researcher's "expectations, opinions, or prejudices" may have influenced the choice in which participants are sampled from the population (McCombes, 2023). Experience bias is another risk, especially as the researcher shares the lifestyle which is being studied. Certain ways of acting or living the lifestyle may be so ingrained in the researcher's mind, it is difficult to see other ways of conducting a task, for example, and might prompt the researcher to jump to conclusions without proper questioning. However, the researcher's shared lifestyle introduces a strong connection to the interviewees and develops rapport, hence providing a greater base understanding of the lifestyle and ability to ask questions past base-level understanding of the lifestyle already earlier in the interview.

Finally, to ensure rigor and quality throughout the research process, meticulous attention was paid to the research design phase, along with the aims, objectives, and specific methodologies. These elements were carefully planned to best align with the research questions. The literature review on relevant topics also guided the selection of appropriate research methods discussed in this section.

4 FINDINGS

By drawing on motivation and identity theories described in the literature review, this section will detail the findings of the interviews with the aim of investigating participants' lifestyles, associated motivations, as well as implications of personal and Finnish identity on vanlife. Please note, quotations from interviews have been translated from Finnish to English accordingly.

4.1 Perception of Lifestyle

One of the main aims of this study is to bring light to how vanlife is currently present and understood among Finnish individuals. As discussed in the literature review, vanlife and related lifestyles are difficult to define and are lived by a variety of individuals in unique ways around the globe. This study explores the phenomena among Finns and makes use of a broader, more inclusive definition of vanlife as illustrated in the sampling above. As stated in *2.4.1 Defining Vanlife*, this study specifically defines vanlife as residing in any type of vehicle anywhere, and for any amount of time. Although the term itself contains various perceptions and definitions in itself, this loose definition limits exclusion of individuals identifying with vanlife or those living a correlating lifestyle due to the small community of Finns participating.

Without vanlife terminology introduced to guide the participants' answers, freedom was the most common theme when initially asked to describe their own lifestyle. The word freedom itself was brought up in 75% (15 out of 20) of responses, most often being the first topic discussed. The theme of freedom was mentioned in various ways, such as

“freedom to come and go,” “freedom to live and be wherever you want,” “freedom to go after things that interest you,” and “financial freedom.” Related to and often discussed alongside freedom, participants described their lifestyle as providing a sense of autonomy. Phrases like “living life the way I want,” “the ability to make my own decisions,” “live life on my own terms,” and “build a life that fits me” emphasize the participants’ importance to have their life in their own hands. Spatial and mental freedoms these lifestyles offer were consistently the most mentioned descriptors for these Finn’s experiences of vanlife. The frequency of this kind of response tells us the aspect of the lifestyle which is most present and valued by participants.

These freedoms and a high level of autonomy do not come without challenges, however. Many described their lifestyle as constant change or discussed how being “constantly having the possibility to either leave or stay” results in having “more decisions to make.” Some participants discussed the challenges of vanlife and the need for adaptability to frequent new situations with comments on how vanlife “requires lots of work” and is “unstable, but on the other side is freedom,” “living in a van requires a lot of flexibility and the ability to adapt to different situations,” and “there are definitely challenges, but it's all part of the adventure.” Challenges were described to be a common occurrence for the lifestyle, and adaptability is the trait required from the participants to face and overcome them. However, despite the negatively connotated idea of a challenge, each instance was described with a positive mindset, illustrating the intrinsic motivation which individuals have for living their lifestyle and how the benefits of the lifestyle outweigh the negatives.

As a result of a lifestyle in constant change, many highlighted the ability to easily travel, explore, and have adventures through their lifestyle. These key aspects were described with terms like “traveling,” “travel life,” “nomadic life,” “adventurous” “active” and “wandering,” highlighting the element of constant movement and resulting exploration. Participants added that “vanlife allows me to travel and explore new places whenever I want,” and that “I love the adventure and spontaneity of life on the road.” Participants emphasized the dynamic nature of their vanlife lifestyle, underscoring its capacity to facilitate travel, exploration, and adventure at will.

Simplicity and minimalism emerged as prominent themes in participants' descriptions of their lifestyles. They often used terms like “easy and relaxed,” “fairly simple,” “minimalistic,” and “less work and more free time and time with family,” indicating a desire for a lifestyle that is uncluttered and focused on essentials. For many, vanlife has been a lesson in appreciating the simple things in life and embracing a more minimalist approach to living. One participant summed that they “enjoy having fewer possessions and living a more minimalist lifestyle” which is a prerequisite for living on the road. This theme reflects a fundamental shift in values, prioritizing experiences and relationships over material possessions.

Lastly, participants emphasized the connection to nature that vanlife affords. Participants described their lifestyles through phrases such as “vanlife affords living closer to nature,” “being in nature,” and “enjoying the outdoors” each reflecting on the naturalistic aspect of the lifestyle. Participants directly associated their ability to connect with nature to the physical van, noting that the van enables access to natural places and the structure of the van itself enables “sounds of nature” to permeate, like when “hearing the wind and rabbits around.” This illustrates a perception that the van is a key gateway or format through which nature can be best experienced. These descriptions indicate a preference for a lifestyle that allows them to be close to nature and engage in outdoor activities, and a preference to avoid urban environments.

Although the above themes were relatable to many participants, one area lacked consensus. Roughly half of participants described their lifestyle as pertaining to a routine, with comments such as “it's still a normal everyday life, just the location changes.” Many noted they don't have much daily routine at all, while others described their lifestyle to be closely tied to routine. This difference in the existence of a routine was also apparent for yearly travel, although no correlation was found between the two. Half of participants had a travel routine, mainly of traveling south for the winter months, and back north to Finland for the summer season. The other half either had no routine of yearly travel or stayed mainly in Finland year-round. Overall, participants described their lifestyle positively and their responses radiated a sense of happiness in their lifestyle decisions, although participants' personal manner of participating in vanlife differed greatly.

4.1.1 Vanlife as a Term

As described in section 2.4.1 *Defining Vanlife*, the term's definition varies greatly among sources. This study aimed to define what the term "vanlife" (Asked directly to define English term but included the Finnish counterpart "pakuelämä" as translation) means for the Finnish vanlife community. Although not every individual participating in the study related with the term or had some friction with it, each participant agreed to the interview on the basis of the loose vanlife definition of this study: *Residing in any vehicle for any amount of time*. What they define and perceive as vanlife may differ from this definition crafted for the purpose of this study.

Based on the responses provided, the key elements of vanlife included all of the same themes as how participants described their own lifestyles. This makes sense, as the majority of participants (70%, 14 out of 20) at least somewhat related to their understanding of the term. These recurring themes included: Freedom & Autonomy, Flexibility & Adaptability, Travel, Adventure & Exploration, Simplicity & Minimalism, as well as a Connection to Nature. Each theme was expressed in a similar manner for this topic as above.

One additional theme arose: a type of non-conformity was associated with the term vanlife. This was described with phrases like "[vanlife] is not bound by the agreements, rules and order of society, so you are able to just take off whenever you want," and "related to vanlife is rebelling against society, although I don't feel the need to practice it." These thoughts illustrate how vanlife is perceived as a lifestyle choice that allows individuals to break away from traditional norms and expectations and therefore live more freely. Although related to the term vanlife, the theme of non-conformity was not as relatable to the participant's own lifestyles, explaining why this topic was not discussed previously.

The same positive tone which was present when participants described their own lifestyles was frequently lost when defining vanlife. Many agreed that although the lifestyle brings happiness to its participants and the idea is built on positive grounds, the term has developed a slight negative connotation. In addition to the tone of voice and expressions in conversation, this connotation came through with phrases like "it's an overused term, as

those who travel in RVs have started using it too” “it no longer means anything,” “it’s negatively connotated as it is outside the norms or society,” “it’s a branded and trendy term,” and “the imagery has been constructed through popular Instagram accounts to be very stereotypical and far from the reality.” Vanlife as a term seems to suffer in its preconceptions, mainly due to its presentation on social media and huge popularity as an alternative lifestyle.

Potentially as a result of this popularity, the discussion on the vanlife term also showed clear conflict among participants as to which modes of the lifestyle can be truly described as vanlife. The first theme which arose was the duration and intensity of vanlife. Some participants define vanlife as a full-time, permanent lifestyle, while others see it as a temporary or part-time arrangement, such as for weekend or seasonal trips. This discrepancy leads to differing views on who can be considered part of the vanlife community. Connected to this, an equally common discussion was about the theme of vehicle type and construction. There is debate over whether vanlife is limited to self-built or customized vans, or if it can also include those living in factory-made motorhomes or RVs. One participant argued that “vanlife for me is living full-time in a car, regardless of whether you have a self-built or factory-made car.” Another said, “everyone who lives part-time or permanently in a van.” For some, vanlife was solely “a concept for self-built vehicles.” Finally, one participant discussed how vanlife is “more about the freedom and nomad life, less about the vehicle.” These responses show the range in the understanding of the term among Finns with some connection to the lifestyle. Interestingly, those participants who had built their vans themselves most often had the understanding that vanlife has a strong do-it-yourself culture and “own hustle and bustle,” which to them meant travel and life in a self-converted vehicle. On the other side, those traveling in factory-made vehicles generally related to the vanlife term and described the term as including themselves as participants in the lifestyle. Overall, many participants noted in different fashions that there is “lots of grey area [on who is involved]” in the vanlife scene, and that most cases the lifestyle’s modes are “different ways of doing the same thing.” Individuals focused on different aspects of the lifestyle for their inclusion or exclusion criteria, but most agreed that they do not wish to exclude anyone from the community although their personal definitions might do so. Participants generally understood the variety of participants and the public’s understanding of vanlife. One participant summed

up the conversation, that in the end “no vanlifer lives the same kind of lifestyle as another anyway.” These differing understandings of vanlife provide an understanding into the complexity of the term even within small populations like that of Finns.

As stated above, 70% of participants at least somewhat related to their understanding of the term vanlife, which is clearly a wide variety as described above. Upon further inquiry, clear themes arose as to understand the reasons behind their relationship with the term or lack thereof. The first theme which seemed to cause friction with relating to the vanlife term was identity and lifestyle alignment. Although individuals may have related with their understanding of vanlife, certain stereotypes or perceptions of the lifestyle held them back from relating completely. Some individuals felt as though their older age kept them from fully belonging to the vanlife community, citing social media as the culprit for the perception that vanlife is for younger people. Others identified with the vanlife lifestyle but had friction with the term as they do not partake in “wild and adventurous hobbies like surfing,” have “remote jobs,” or “travel south for the winter.” These stereotypes of the lifestyle impacted various participant’s relation to the term, indicating the strength of the vanlife stereotype present in the media.

The second theme which arose from conversations was vanlife’s overall modern perception. Participants highlighted that the that the image of the term does not accurately reflect their reality. One participant said they do not relate with the term, as the “vanlifers have suffered from that image that has been ingrained through social media stereotypes.” Others noted friction with the term due to the perception having changed over time, saying that the term is “misleading in the era of social media, it’s not the same lifestyle as what I encountered back then.” The term vanlife has evolved, leading to varying interpretations and associations, which can create confusion and different expectations among individuals identifying with the term.

Related to the modern perception, the theme of convenience came about. Although the term is seen as convenient for describing their lifestyle to others, it does not fully capture the nuances of their experiences. Many agreed that they wanted to “live in their own way” and not be defined through an umbrella term which vanlife has become in many participants eyes.

Lastly, related to the conversation on social media, the theme of commercialization was frequently discussed. Many participants with varying relationships to the term admitted to using #vanlife in social media posts. However, many agreed the term has garnered a growing commercialization through its media popularity and therefore does not represent the authentic, diverse experiences within the "vanlife" community. A few participants noted that directly due to the commercialization, the term has gotten "less directly relatable." However, one participant noted that "the relationship to the term would probably change if we started doing social media with a sales agenda, because that's the term that would get us into that market."

Overall, these themes on participants' relationship to vanlife highlight the evolution of the term in the modern day to a niche subset of the true variety in the community of individuals who reside in their vehicles. To conclude these findings on vanlife as a term, an average definition of vanlife was created from the responses. According to the participants of this study:

Vanlife is a lifestyle characterized by living and traveling in a van, typically for extended periods, often involving self-built or customized vehicles. It is associated with freedom, simplicity, and a sense of autonomy, allowing individuals to live life on their own terms. While it is often romanticized and trendy, encompassing elements of adventure and exploration, it also requires adaptability and flexibility due to its constantly changing nature. Vanlife is not limited to a specific type of vehicle, length of stay, or mode of travel; rather, it is defined by a mindset of freedom and exploration, often associated with a preference for nature and outdoor living. Vanlife is a lifestyle choice that varies widely among individuals but is a welcoming community which connects individuals both during travels and through social media.

Although this study aims to find common threads in definitions, Finns in this study view vanlife in a variety of ways, with their variety of experiences within the lifestyle. The purpose of this definition is to provide insight into the understanding of the term for this subgroup of participants.

4.1.2 Nomadism as a Term

Often cited as a lifestyle parallel or connected to vanlife, nomadism is a term used to describe another alternative lifestyle in the modern day. The findings and key themes found within Finnish vanlifers' thoughts on the modern meaning of nomadism are described in this section. Participants noted various overlaps between nomadism and vanlife, many connecting with or rejecting elements of either term. Due to the various viewpoints on terminology, this discussion is valuable in light of this research on Finnish vanlifers' lifestyles and identities.

Much like the vanlife lifestyle, nomadism is connotated with freedom. Participants understood the lifestyle as “freeing,” “not tied to one place and able to move freely,” “impermanent,” “open plans,” and a feeling of being a “wanderer” or “traveler.” They described someone who is somewhat removed from society and feels that their “home and life is wherever they happen [and want] to be.” These frequent responses illustrate that movement, autonomy, and independence from society are at the core of vanlife.

As compared to the term vanlife, responses to defining the term nomadism had a much clearer positive tone and certain individuals even explicitly said they liked the term. Despite this, a similar percentage, at 65% (versus 70% for vanlife) related with the nomadism term. The descriptors included generally negatively connotated words in a positive light, for example with one participant describing nomadism as “rootless in a positive way.” Two others noted they admire the lifestyle and are striving to make it possible for them through new remote jobs. Being free from ties or obligations to a specific place or lifestyle was generally seen as a positive aspect from the perspective of these Finnish vanlifers. Although negatively connotated comments arose, i.e., that nomadism is a similar “romanticized term” like vanlife, there seems to be something in the core of nomadism that connects more positively and speaks to the lifestyle these individuals live.

One phrase which came up consistently with nomadism but was missing from vanlife was the idea of nomads being “cosmopolitans,” or “global citizens.” One respondent described how nomadism enables one to “widen your own perspectives and your environment” through experiencing life in different places. Another mentioned that nomads are

“interested and curious about the world.” Cosmopolitan was missing from discussions of the vanlife term, possibly due to nomadism being more closely tied to a worldview that transcends national boundaries and emphasizes a broad, global perspective. On the other hand, vanlife, while also mobile and potentially involving travel, is often more associated with a specific mode of living in a van or similar vehicle. Vanlifers may travel within a country or region but may not necessarily prioritize extensive international travel or have the same level of engagement with global issues or communities as nomads.

Related to being such global citizens, independence (particularly location independence) was another theme which was clear from the responses. Participants described nomadism as life “without any permanent address” or home, “living where you want” and being able to work from wherever. This aspect of work was commented on in nearly all responses, illustrating a clear perception of modern nomadism being a lifestyle described through the individual’s mode of work. Digital nomadism is often the term used for the concept, which in itself contains the idea that digital means enable a nomadic lifestyle. Respondents agreed, stating that in modern nomadism you often work on a laptop and the “work travels with you” location independently. Project-based work was also agreed to be an element often associated with digital nomadism in particular. The focus on work within modern nomadism illustrates their strong connection, unlike that of vanlife.

These themes collectively describe nomadism as a lifestyle choice characterized by freedom, global citizenship, independence, and flexible, often remote work. Indicating a clear connection to vanlife but distinction as a positive term more tied to personal identity instead of the physical mode of life.

With nomadism, a much stronger consensus of the term was reached among respondents as stated above. 65% related, mainly stating that the term described their way of life well and is a good way to describe their lifestyle generally to others. Participants related particularly with the location independence aspect of the lifestyle, mainly due to their work. A few stated this term fit their lifestyle “more than vanlife.” Some described vanlife as a “form of nomadism,” while others believed them to “exist separately.” Those who did not relate to nomadism either said they do not relate “yet,” highlighting a clear desire to transition more towards their definition of the term, or that they felt as though they didn’t fit the lifestyle’s

boundaries. To the latter individuals, the fact that they had some kind of cabin, place they returned to, or other kind of home base excluded them from nomadism. Nevertheless, nomadism was equally present in the conversations as a form of alternative lifestyle which has its place in discussions about vanlife.

Based on the responses in this study, an average definition of the term follows: Nomadism is a lifestyle characterized by freedom and independence, where individuals live without a permanent address, moving freely to wherever suits them best. It embodies a global citizenship mindset, embracing a self-sufficient and flexible approach to work, often involving digital nomadism. Nomadism is not just about work but also about exploring new perspectives and environments, breaking away from traditional societal norms, and valuing the transient nature of life and relationships.

As stated above for the definition on vanlife, although this study aims to find common threads in definitions, Finns in this study view nomadism in a variety of ways, with their variety of experiences within the lifestyle. The purpose of this definition is to provide insight into the understanding of the term for this subgroup of participants.

4.1.3 Other Terminology

“I relate, but at the same time, I’m a bit allergic to all terms. I don’t want terms to define my life too much or for people to see my life only through those terms.”

Friction with terminology was frequent throughout the interviews. Although some used the terms this research studied, various participants brought up their own terminology to describe their lifestyles. These included the following list:

- “Living in a vehicle”
- “Human experiment”
- “Location independent”
- “Lifestyle Indian”
- “Vagabond” or “wanderer”
- “Vehicle/car traveling” or “road tripping.”

- “Off-grid”
- “Hippie”

Please note, these terms will not be further analyzed, but rather included in the *6.4 Further Research* section as reference for other studies.

In conclusion, participants often described terminology as a shortcut way to categorize themselves or others to obtain a general understanding of one’s lifestyle. However, as a result of using terminology, the other party often jumped to conclusions and a deeper understanding of the lifestyle was missed. Discussions on terminology noted this adverse effect. Varying understandings of terms by different people yielded overgeneralizations and constricted or created misconceptions of one’s lifestyle. On the other hand, relating to terminology was shown to have the possibility to associate oneself more easily with a certain community, for example through social media as described in section 2.4.3 *Vanlife and Social Media*. In the case of this study, discussions on terminology are used as a jumping off point to understand the participants’ lifestyles, their group identification, as well as how Finn’s involved in such lifestyles might perceive them.

4.2 Lifestyle Motivations

A primary aim of this research is to discover the core motivations of Finns’ for participating in the vanlife lifestyle, in addition to how those motivations might change post-transition. The following section details core themes in the motivations to enter the lifestyle, how those motivations fulfilled, and what additional motivations arose when considering continuing the lifestyle.

4.2.1 Motivations to Enter Vanlife

Firstly, participants reported their initial motivations for entering the lifestyle, which can be categorized into seven clear themes with minimal outliers. Although everyone’s story was unique, the clarity of themes among responses signals a broad consensus among participants in terms of the motivations to practice vanlife. These common themes include

dissatisfaction with one's previous lifestyle (1), mobility (2), travel (3), escaping Finnish winter (4), financial savings (5), ownership/minimalism (6), and gaining freedom (7).

The dissatisfaction with one's previous lifestyle was by far the most discussed topic among participants when describing their reasons for deciding to pursue vanlife (theme 1).

Participants also described a certain "anxiety [which] came from their previous living situation," and chose vanlife to combat these struggles, hoping that the change in lifestyle would improve their "mental health," and overall "remove stimuli from life." Yet, the most common reason behind this anxiety and dissatisfied feelings was traditional modes of work and life. "Jumping out of the rat race" was a core motivation for many. Others noted that previous responsibilities caused them to be "tied down by things." One individual noted that they had thought about the change in lifestyle for the future, but they were "just fed up [with work and the lifestyle], let's sell everything and buy that caravan now, why are we thinking about it 5-7 years from now when we can just do it now?" One participant summed common feelings, noting that "several years in a very stressful job started taking all the time from hobbies and friends." Although this theme is broad, it encompasses a similar sentiment among participants that change was needed, and it came in the form of vanlife. Consequently, vanlife's perceived ability to provide a general format for a new kind of lifestyle surfaced as a common thread in these findings. Additionally, the lifestyle choice was seen by participants as a way to air out thoughts, understand what one wants from life and what is important, rethink daily life, and aid in "changing the direction of life." As a final thought, the trend among participants was that these thoughts of needing change arose after burnouts, tragedies, health concerns, or most commonly, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, behind these sentiments, there seems to be a deep-seated need for personal fulfillment and a desire to live a life that is more aligned with your authentic self and personal desires. The feelings of frustration, fed-upness, and the need for change suggest a longing for a lifestyle that offers more freedom, flexibility, and autonomy. The experiences of stress, heavy responsibilities, and lack of personal space may have led to a sense of being trapped or constrained, prompting a search for alternatives like vanlife, which participants found to have the potential to provide a greater sense of autonomy and well-being. Additionally, the impact of major personal tragedies and health concerns likely intensified these feelings, prompting a re-evaluation of what

truly matters in life and a desire to prioritize experiences and personal growth over material possessions or societal expectations.

As a theme more focused on the physical, the mobility which vanlife affords was a key motivation for the majority of participants (theme 2). Primarily, participants brought up the topic of work regarding mobility. 50% of participants noted that that vanlife enabled them to make their work easier, through reducing or even eliminating commutes completely, reducing stress and planning and improving various kinds of work opportunities. One participant agreed with this improved experience and simplicity, that “when you jump into the car, that's it, that's home, there's a lot less running around.” On the other hand, those with remote work enjoyed that through vanlife they can more easily “combine work with traveling” with remote work that can be “done from anywhere.” Most noted that their motivations to enter vanlife included motivation to start working remotely, “I found it an exciting idea, that if there was a job that could be done while traveling.” With this kind of arrangement, participants noted that they could travel, even full-time, without “stressing about money” as work could be completed alongside. Aside from work, many participants raised the fact that the mobility required for their hobbies was a key motivator to enter vanlife. These hobbies included kiteboarding/surfing, climbing, hiking, and mountain biking: activities which are season dependent (especially in Finland), require heavy equipment, and/or benefit from practicing it in different places. Participants noted that vanlife lets them to take advantage of its mobility for the benefit of their sport, allowing them to travel with all they need affordably and in essence “live close to the hobby.” This theme illustrates vanlife's mouldability to different kinds of activities. Related to the themes of travel and freedom yet to be discussed, mobility motivated Finnish vanlifers to pursue the lifestyle as it simplifies their lifestyle in terms of work and hobbies. However, a frustration or dissatisfaction with their previous lifestyle is behind this theme as well, as one participant summed, before vanlife, “I was still living in the car most of the time, from home to work, from work to home, and same for the gym and the store, etc.” Hence, the motivation of mobility is also a motivation to reduce unnecessary mobility, signaling a desire to live where one finds most convenient at any given moment.

Although related, while the motivation of mobility is more about simplicity and convenience, the motivation of travel is more of a desire of “seeing the world” and

“experiencing new places” (theme 3). Participants were often motivated to enter vanlife due to their previous experience with backpacking or travel, and a desire to continue travel in a more permanent manner. Vanlife as a lifestyle enables a huge opportunity to travel, and for many Finnish vanlifers this interest motivated them to pursue it.

Separate from travel, participants frequently cited “getting away from Finland’s cold winter” as a motivation to live a mobile lifestyle like vanlife (theme 4). Participants mentioned “being more comfortable somewhere else” for the winter, and that “a vacation wouldn’t be enough” from Finland’s long period of darkness and cold, noting that they would want to be away for the “entirety of winter.” One participant had a similar motivation, describing that moving into a van for the winter provided them with an improved shelter which a tent could not provide in Finnish winter. Although not all participants left Finland for the winter or even had the desire to do so, those participants who mentioned this motivation seemed to consider it as central to their reasoning for living vanlife. This illustrates the uniqueness in the motivations of vanlife for a country like that of Finland, with the climate directly impacting individual’s lifestyle choices.

Another element related more specifically to the situation in Finland is the financial side of vanlife (theme 5). Saving money was a recurring motivation in responses, with individuals citing the lower cost of living in a vehicle compared to traditional housing in Finland. Similar frustrations arose from the above discussions on dissatisfaction with old lifestyles. One participant noted that they “couldn’t ever afford to buy a place in Helsinki,” while another noted their frustration that “we’re not going to pay rent to anyone anymore, we’ll build a car, go on a trip, and save money.” These frustrations were met with the positives of the lifestyle. Connected to motivations linked to the above theme of travel, various participants noted that vanlife “makes traveling cheaper,” one noting that they “noticed traveling in Europe is cheaper than living in Finland.” The frequency in responses relating to financial savings as a source of motivation demonstrates the high cost of living in Finland and the changes people are willing to make in order to avoid paying such prices.

The theme of ownership and namely minimalism was frequent in discussions on motivations (theme 6). Participants brought up notions of “not wanting to own” much at all and “letting go of everything.” This desire for a more minimalistic life came about through

“thinking about how important material really is” and concluding that it is “futile.” One participant in particular noted that “I don't want to own anything anymore, except for this car, because it would tie me down.” This topic describes the motivation of freedom through the physical, illustrating that these individuals found material to prevent them from living a life that they desired.

Often included as an aspect of other themes listed here, freedom itself was a core theme when participants described the motivations in their transition to vanlife (theme 7). Sentiments included “freedom is #1,” “able to come and go and be freely,” “feeling free,” and able to determine/build one’s life. One participant summed common feelings, that “freedom and the longing for it are such a big theme in my life.” As elements of freedom are encompassed in all responses and hence most all themes, freedom is more of an umbrella term to describe the desires of Finnish vanlife participants. Freedom permeates all motivations of Finnish vanlifers, whether that is freedom from the constraints of a previous lifestyle, freedom from traditional work and life, freedom to move and travel, financial freedoms, and the freedom resulting from fewer things or responsibilities.

Overall, these themes provide insight into the minds of the Finnish vanlifers on what they viewed as core push and pull factors in relation to their alternative lifestyles. Additionally, this study indicates that the motivations described by participants to enter and continue vanlife are achievable through the lifestyle, hence vanlife is moldable to various kinds of motivations.

4.2.2 Motivations to Continue Vanlife

The above themes describe the motivations of participants to enter vanlife. However, this study also aims to find out how those motivations are fulfilled and how they develop over time, post-transition to vanlife. This section will cover the major themes regarding motivations to continue the vanlife lifestyle.

According to this study, 100% of participants agreed that their initial motivations were largely fulfilled, especially after “learning how [the lifestyle] worked” for them. The only point of discrepancy was that of financial savings, some citing that they ended up “saving

more than they expected” through vanlife, while others noted having “not saved money,” while other motivations were met. This could be due to the unique spending and travel habits of participants, and the overall way in which they live vanlife. Additionally, 90% of participants had no set end date to their new vanlife lifestyle, signifying that they sought a more permanent lifestyle change to satisfy their motivations.

All responses were positively connotated, and participants frequently noted that “vanlife met their expectations” of the lifestyle, some even citing that it “exceeded their expectations.” Hence, a common theme among participants was the desire to continue the lifestyle, with comments like “we've liked this travel lifestyle so much that we haven't wanted to return to normal life in Finland,” “not regretted it even once,” and that “all other options seem worse than living in a car.” The positive tone and confident responses of participants in wanting to continue this lifestyle further proves that the motivations described above are possible to be achieved through vanlife.

In addition to participants confirming that the above motivation themes came to fruition with the lifestyle, additional motivations arose after transitioning to vanlife. These motivations include those under themes of self-discovery and personal growth (1), new experiences and cultures (2), a new concept of home (3), improved social connections (4), and connection to nature (5). These themes describe the additional motivations of Finnish vanlifers' experiences after living various amounts of time (from 1 month to 8 years) in their new lifestyles.

Firstly, participants described various motivations detailing self-discovery and personal growth (theme 1) which they have achieved through the vanlife lifestyle. In various ways, responses highlighted new kinds of thinking the lifestyle caused, such as with “organizing life in a different way,” “creating space for creativity,” and how the minimalistic nature of the lifestyle would “guide life decisions for the future,” to name a few. Through vanlife, participants also noted how living vanlife in itself “motivates you every day when waking up, when you live a life you like.” This kind of sentiment of enjoying one's lifestyle was common throughout responses. A sort of confidence was clear from participants, that they were motivated to keep living vanlife as their “motives have become clearer and more prominent [after] enabling this lifestyle for myself.” Overall, this theme of self-discovery

and personal growth signals that a lifestyle change like that to vanlife incites introspection and grants autonomy to guide one's life in a direction that best suits them.

Another theme included participants being further motivated to travel due to the new experiences and cultural immersion vanlife enables (theme 2). Participants enjoyed vanlife, as it allowed them to "experience a lot," including "experiencing cultures in a different way," and get to "visit different places by car than by flying." Vanlife's benefit as a slow travel method was motivating for participants to continue the lifestyle, highlighting the vanlifer's interests in exploration and different cultures.

Naturally, once transitioning to living vanlife, participants discovered not only more about what their lifestyle affords, but also about the new home itself (theme 3). A new concept of home was another frequent theme among responses. Participants agreed that they were motivated to continue the lifestyle as their vehicle became "very homely," and that packing became unnecessary. One participant described that you can "do things without planning or packing as everything is with you. You don't need to know what you need when all your belongings are with you." Not only was the traveling itself easier with the vehicle, one participant in particular described how van travel enabled them to travel without tiring, as "home was always with them:"

"Now that we have this home with us, moving feels much lighter, don't need to pack things, always know where to find things, routines inside the home are always the same. It is mentally much lighter to travel with a van, and I wouldn't change to any other form of travel even if I could get more space."

Responses related to the theme of home show just how much the physical home means to their residents and hence their high motivation to continue living in it.

Expanding on the theme of mobility from the motivations to enter vanlife, participants described how vanlife not only gives the opportunity to travel flexibly for work and hobbies, but also has given the possibility to easily see friends and family more often (theme 4). One participant summed up that with vanlife they discovered "how easy it is to visit friends". You don't need to bother anyone. You have your own food and bed, so

there's a low threshold to go hang out." Although various participants agreed that new, in-person relationships are difficult to foster and combine with the vanlife lifestyle, social media enabled the formation of new relationships with people that share the mobile lifestyle. A participant expressed that they had "found like-minded people on social media, and through it felt like they belonged to a (micro)community." In terms of the community itself, one response described it to be a mobile "group who have decided to live different from the norm and live the kind of life they want, with whom one can connect and identify with." Another participant with similar thoughts added how "It feels good to belong somewhere, as it is a human need." Despite these online connections, the vast majority of participants agreed that there is a lack of a vanlifer community, especially within Finnish vanlifers, and expressed a desire to work in fostering it. One participant noted that "the Finnish vanlifer community is only getting started." Some participants noted participating in a new event for the Finnish vanlife community, organized by its members. Hence, the desire for social connections within vanlife is set to improve, according to participants. Vanlife continues to be motivated by mobility, especially with the theme expanded to improving social connections.

Lastly, a connection to nature was found by many participants to be a core theme motivating them to continue the lifestyle (theme 5). "Enjoying nature in different places," and "the ability to spend more time in nature" encompass responses related to nature. Although this theme was minimally present in the motivations to enter vanlife, its strong presence in these responses indicate vanlife to be a lifestyle that brings participants close to nature or helps vanlifers discover it.

In conclusion, the motivations driving individuals to enter and continue vanlife are diverse and their combinations vary among individuals. The study's findings indicate that participants' initial motivations for entering vanlife were largely fulfilled, with many expressing that the lifestyle met and even exceeded their expectations. These motivations included a dissatisfaction with one's previous lifestyle, mobility, travel, escaping Finnish winter, financial savings, ownership/minimalism, and gaining freedom. Furthermore, the study reveals that vanlife not only meets but also generates new motivations over time, such as self-discovery and personal growth, new experiences and cultural immersion, a new concept of home, improved social connections, and a closer connection to nature.

Participants' positive experiences and strong desire to continue the lifestyle demonstrate that the motivations described are achievable through vanlife, highlighting its potential to offer a fulfilling and meaningful way of life.

4.3 Findings on Identity

4.3.1 Personal Identity and the Vanlife Experience

Identity strongly connects to our motivations, and therefore also to how we create and perceive our lifestyles (Oyserman, 2015). This study aims to discover how the identities of Finnish vanlifers connect to both their motivations as well as their overall lifestyle. As part of this exploration, participants were asked to reflect on their identities and how these might impact the motivations they discussed and their overall experience of the vanlife lifestyle. These discussions were crucial in understanding the nuanced relationship between identity, motivations, and lifestyle choices among Finnish vanlifers, the findings of which are described in this section.

As for the personal identities of participants, responses were immensely varied. This variation signifies vanlife's compatibility with different kinds of people. However, six clear themes arose throughout responses when specifically discussing links between personal identities and vanlife. These themes included: vanlife as a part of identity (1), embracing the unknown (2), a strong sense of self (3), restlessness (4), a relationship with nature (5), and a desire for freedom (6). These themes will be described in further detail below.

Firstly, a trend among participants was to include their lifestyle of vanlife as directly a part of their identities. Some stated that vanlife being a part of their identity is self-explanatory, saying things like “of course what I want to do is a part of my identity.” Others explained how the lifestyle has “strengthened my true identity,” while some argued that “my sense of self affects why I live like this.” Although difficult to distinguish which affect which, one participant summed that their “lifestyle and identity have melded together,” noting the strong connection between identity and the vanlife lifestyle for participants. Another participant mentioned that the interrelation is so strong, that “I might be lost if I moved

into an apartment. I would question if I still were the person who I am in the car.” In addition to these comments linking personal identities to vanlife, all participants agreed that the vanlife lifestyle suits them and their identities better than the lifestyle they lived before. Responses showed that a strong element of vanlifers’ identity is their choice to live the lifestyle itself, indicating the huge personal significance of the lifestyle for its participants.

The second theme connected participants through their identities was a certain embrace of the unknown. The study found that a core reason for participants finding vanlife a suitable lifestyle choice were their traits of curiosity, openness, adventurous spirit, and their desire to see and experience new things. These elements of identity describe a certain personality who is eager to understand and experience what is unknown to them. In terms of curiosity, participants described that their “curious nature is a strong driver behind all of my lifestyle decisions,” and that before vanlife, “my curious mind did not get what it wanted and directed me to the freedom vanlife offers,” this freedom being the biggest motivator for the majority of participants to enter vanlife. Participants consistently noted that whether they were living vanlife or not, their identities always consisted of a curiosity and open-mindedness for the world and an adventurous spirit. These comments indicate that these elements of identity are not directly a result of living the vanlife lifestyle. However, many cited that vanlife is a “huge opportunity” for embracing each of these facets of their identity. These findings tell us that not only do individuals with these traits find their way to vanlife, but also that vanlife is able to satisfy them.

Thirdly, the theme of a strong sense of self was prevalent among participants. Responses related to this theme included sentiments of courage, a certain non-conformity, confidence, and independence. Participants often described themselves as brave, wanting to “jump into the unknown,” “overcome fears,” and that they feel that they “can do anything.” Traits of bravery or courage were often described as a contributing factor in entering vanlife in the first place. Additionally, various responses included mentions of always finding and “following one’s own path” and often “doing things in an alternative way,” which is “rarely the easiest path.” Sentiments of wanting to figure out a lifestyle for oneself which fits them and makes them feel good were common throughout responses. Behind all of these commonalities among respondents are certain feelings of confidence, independence,

and even a bit of stubbornness. These ideas were explicitly raised by participants, with comments like “living a life which suits me required confidence,” that “I am good at making strong decisions,” and that “I have the stubbornness to do things to the end.” This kind of grit and confidence shared by respondents allowed them to enter a lifestyle which suited them best. Finally, for many, where their identity and the vanlife lifestyle coincided and more importantly culminated was in the desire for self-determination. The majority of participants shared sentiments of “enjoying having lots of control over my own life and how I live it every day,” being “active in doing things which I want,” and “the mind desiring freedom to choose how I do things myself.” Similar to push factors motivating participants to enter vanlife as described above, control over one’s life indicates an aversion to controlling environments. These concepts all relate to a strong sense of self and a willingness to act according to one’s own desires. They reflect a sense of self-assuredness, freedom from external influence, and the courage to go after what one genuinely wants. As vanlife is a form of alternative lifestyle, it correlates that those who enter it need a certain strength and confidence to go against the grain. Overall, the theme of a strong sense of self illustrates the strong nature of Finnish vanlifers and describes the traits which are a benefit within vanlife itself.

Fourthly, restlessness was an immensely common trait among participants when describing their identities. Participants mentioned “not being able to stay still,” and consistently having “the initiative to leave and plan trips.” On the other side, participants noted that they have not “felt at home in situations which tie me down, such as an apartment or job.” Those who mentioned their restless spirit also noted that vanlife soothes these feelings exceptionally well. Vanlife works for some so well, as they “prefer being on the road rather than at the destination.” One participant described that their “restless spirit is somewhat home here [in the van].” These findings indicate that restlessness is a trait commonly shared among the Finnish vanlife community. Although often seen as a negative trait, these individuals have all found this way of life where they can benefit from this core aspect of their identity.

The fifth theme connecting personal identity and vanlife is a relationship with nature, as seen also in the motivations to enter vanlife. This study found that a “desire to enjoy the outdoors” and “live close to nature” are common attributes shared within identities of

Finnish vanlifers. Participants identified with nature, stating that it is a core aspect of their identity and through vanlife are able to better stay connected to it.

The sixth and final theme found within the identities of Finnish vanlifers is freedom. Much like in previous sections on the perception of the lifestyle and motivation, freedom is yet again an integral part in responses. However, a desire for freedom stemming from identity would explain both the appeal of vanlife to such individuals, and how participants view the lifestyle after having experienced its freedoms. This study's participants reported a desire or even longing for freedom as a core element of their identity. As stated before, the lifestyle itself means freedom for these participants, partially explaining their participation. As per responses specifically on identity, similar sentiments arose. Those included the freedom to choose, live, be where you want, and not be "tied to anywhere, anything, or anyone." Freedom, however simple of a word, is a multifaceted concept when described in connection to the lifestyles of this study's participants. It is all encompassing and works in conjunction with themes of restlessness (to desire that freedom) and a strong sense of self (to push individuals to go after freedom).

Overall, the identities of the participants are strongly linked to vanlife through the themes of vanlife as a part of identity (1), embracing the unknown (2) a strong sense of self (3), restlessness (4), a relationship with nature (5), and a desire for freedom (6). All these themes have an impact on participants' motivations and satisfaction with the vanlife lifestyle. Participants value the ability to make their own life decisions which soothe their restless spirit and the resulting desires for freedom, exploration, and connecting to nature. In the end, Finnish vanlifers aim to strongly align their identities to their lifestyle and are motivated to prioritize personal fulfillment.

4.3.2 Finnish Identity and the Vanlife Experience

In addition to connecting personal identity and vanlife, this study aims to understand the connection between participants' Finnish identities to their experience with vanlife.

Although a few individuals participating in the study had some friction identifying with a Finnish national identity, each participant agreed to the interview on the basis of having a strong connection to Finland. Participants were specifically asked to identify what aspects

of their identity could be a result of their Finnish national (or geographic, i.e., grown up in Finland) identities, and how those could have impacted both their motivations to enter vanlife as well as experience it. This section will outline the key themes of the interview findings, which include shyness (1), an appreciation for peace and personal space (2), “mökki” or cabin culture (3), nature (4), and “sisu,” a kind of Finnish perseverance (5).

Firstly, various participants related to the trait of being shy or hesitant from initiating social interaction. Although many agreed that vanlife offers an opportunity for its own kind of community, many agreed that the common trait of shyness inhibits its formation. Various participants noted that it is not a common culture to “say hello” to other vans or RVs, especially when wild camping. Another mentioned that “it is not so easy to talk to strangers [as Finns].” In vanlife, the “community would be important, but Finnishness brings challenges as we don’t warm up to strangers so fast.” This trait, reportedly present throughout Finns and therefore Finnish vanlifers, could give another reason to the slowly budding Finnish vanlife community discussed in section 4.2.2 Motivations to Continue Vanlife. This common personality trait among Finns is shown to negatively impact the overall vanlife experience.

Secondly, an appreciation for peace and personal space was present throughout the interviews. Participants consistently sought peace, space, and quiet in their vanlife experience, noting that vanlife enables them to reach these places and states easily. Participants also connected these traits to Finnish identity, saying that “peace and personal space truly speaks to Finns.” Some analyzed further, explaining that these traits of Finnish identity most likely come from the low population density of Finland. Finland has a lot of wildernesses and sparsely populated areas, where many participants expressed the desire to move to in order to access this peace, space, and quiet. One participant agreed, stating that “Finland has a lot of places where you can hide from everything.” Another mentioned that these Finnish traits reflect in “the way we choose parking spots with our van, we choose to be far away from others as in Finland we are used to the personal space and social distance.” Based on these findings, the desire for peace and personal space among Finnish vanlifers is shown to impact travel decisions and the way in which the lifestyle is enjoyed.

Thirdly, and related to the above, Finnish “mökki” or cabin culture seems to impact various aspects of vanlife for its Finnish participants. Other than cabin culture relating to the above theme of seeking peace, space, and quiet, the culture of relaxation through returning to basics is a highly valued activity related to Finnish mökki life, i.e., with chopping wood. One participant specifically noted how “vanlife has similar aspects [to mökki culture], in that you need to do work in order for you to meet your basic needs, such as heating or carrying water.” Additionally, the construction of cabins and houses in Finland appears to play a part in the type of vehicles Finns build and reside in. One participant in particular described how:

“I grew up in an old wooden house from the 50’s, and I wanted the same kind of brown wooden ceiling from my childhood home in the van. I wanted the van to be homely, but factory-made vehicles did not appeal to me. In the end, a self-built wooden cabin on wheels is what I went for.”

Not only does wood as a material allude to homeliness for Finns, the wooden, cabin-like homes are what Finnish vanlifers believe belongs best to the places they generally wish to park. Whether traveling “in nature, on the lakeside, or on the side of a mountain- what fits better than a “mökki.” Overall, the mökki culture of Finland plays an important role in the development of the vanlife trend throughout Finns, including connected elements of returning to basics, wood as a constructing material for homeliness, and a cabin-aesthetic which suits best to desired travel locations.

Fourth, and connected to both preceding themes, an appreciation for nature arose from responses. Participants explained that a certain “valuing of nature,” “closeness to nature,” “living with nature,” and a “longing for nature” are core elements to both Finnish identity and how they live vanlife. When discussing nature, the forest was mentioned above all else. This correlates to Finland, as most of Finland is covered in forest. One participant noted that “the forest has always been close to me and a part of my life,” and another mentioned that “for the majority of Finns, nature is not such a distant concept as it might be in other countries.” In Finland, children are exposed to nature nearly from birth. Many children connect with nature and learn to live in it through “scouts” and “all play and activities happening outside,” making nature, and the forest in particular, very homely and

familiar to Finns. Finns generally “know how to value and function in nature” due to this early connection with it, according to responses. As a result of this, Finnish vanlifers aim to not impact nature in a negative way through their lifestyle, hence many “notice and get frustrated at other vanlifers who don’t know how to value nature, and i.e., litter.” Although the connection and desire to be in nature is not unique to only Finnish vanlifers, Finns have a particular connection to it due to the Finnish environment.

As the fifth and final theme, “sisu” or a kind of Finnish perseverance was prevalent throughout participants’ experiences. Sisu is not a simple word to explain, containing connotations of resilience, self-sufficiency, persistence, resourcefulness, toughness, survival, and the ability to cope with challenges, all of which were mentioned separately by the participants of this study. According to participants, these traits come from both the history and climate of Finland. Participants explained that these traits as well as the over-encompassing idea of sisu were “strengthened by Finland’s history.” During the winter war against Russia in 1939-1940, Finnish men fought, and women worked and took care of everything at home, hence everyone received the “being strong, resilient, and able to cope” as a sort of inheritance from this time in history not too long ago. Finland’s harsh winter has naturally also had an impact on the Finnish identity. One participant described how:

“We as Finns are accustomed to being able to live even when it’s cold and our toes are freezing, and things are a bit difficult. We are willing to compromise comfort to achieve something, which in someone's opinion might be very little in return. It’s probably that we've become accustomed to the idea that everything doesn't always have to be really fancy to be truly satisfied, happy, and content.”

The character that a cold climate develops fosters resilience, resourcefulness, and not being easily daunted. Even when it is “minus 30 degrees Celsius, you still must handle work, school, and all the usual things. It toughens you in some way,” noted another participant.

Connecting to vanlife, participants reported these traits to be particularly apparent when building the van, solving problems, or fixing things by themselves, and the overall happiness in the lifestyle. One participant connected that due to these Finnish traits, they “are not fazed by minor setbacks” which naturally occur in vanlife. A certain pride was

apparent from participants when describing their lifestyles and especially the challenges they have overcome, one explaining proudly that “the van is self-built, and I know how to fix it too,” connecting to the element of self-sufficiency. Due to the Finnish identity participants described, they feel that they “have the readiness to fix things regardless of the circumstances, like warming up batteries in the cold, if the car is stuck, etc. without rushing or panicking.” Another participant noted that these problems “do not affect the quality of life or the meaningfulness of the lifestyle [for Finns], they are just a part of it, and the task is managed.” Finnish traits like Sisu and related terms therefore hint to a reason for Finn’s experiencing such joy and well-being from the vanlife lifestyle in the first place.

In conclusion, these findings describe five key features of Finnish identity impacting the motivations for experiences with vanlife, including themes of shyness (1), an appreciation for peace and personal space (2), “mökki” or cabin culture (3), nature (4), and “sisu,” a kind of Finnish perseverance (5). The innate shyness prevalent among Finns poses challenges to community-building within the vanlife culture, while a deep-seated appreciation for peace, personal space, and nature informs travel decisions and explains how vanlife is often enjoyed. Next, the theme of Finnish “mökki” influences not only lifestyle preferences but also the design and aesthetics of vans. The connected theme of nature explains how Finnish vanlifers prioritize and deeply value their relationship with the natural environment, hence instilling in them a sense of responsibility to protect and preserve nature through their lifestyle. Furthermore, the history behind and concept of “sisu” instills resilience, resourcefulness, and self-sufficiency, contributing to the satisfaction and contentment derived from overcoming challenges in vanlife. Ultimately, these findings highlight the nuanced connections between Finnish identity and the vanlife phenomenon, describing how the lifestyle is unique to the Finns who participate.

5 DISCUSSION

Vanlife is a multi-faceted lifestyle enabling individuals to create a life which suits them, satisfy their motivations, and create or connect more strongly with their identities. Through

exploring perceptions of the vanlife lifestyle, motivations, and personal as well as national identities among the Finnish participants, the goal of this study is to uncover the reasons behind the initial popularity of vanlife in Finland and how the lifestyle's facets are uniquely experienced by Finns, especially at the initial stages of community formation. In this section, findings are discussed in the context of previous literature and various motivation and identity theories, including Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Self-Determination Theory, as well as Identity-Based Motivation and Social Identity Theory.

5.1 Perception of Lifestyle

Participants of this study were keen to explain their lifestyles at length, hence engaging conversations about terminology and their relationship to it arose from interviews. When participants were able to freely describe their lifestyles without the use of terminology as a base, individuals took on a positive tone with key themes including freedom and autonomy (1), constant change and adaptability (2), travel, exploration, and adventures (3), simplicity and minimalism (4), and connection to nature (5). These themes encompass the lifestyle for Finnish individuals living vanlife (under the definitions of this study), providing a valuable understanding of the status and form of this lifestyle for this subgroup of the overall lifestyle.

When discussing the term vanlife and its definition, the same themes arose, potentially due to 70% of individuals relating with the term. The aspect of vanlife as a countercultural movement or expressing "non-conformity" was just as present in the interviews of this study as it was in literature, possibly highlighting that the roots and history of vanlife are still present in the connotation of the term today (Aittamaa, 2022; Dorn, 2015). The fact that this theme was missing from the descriptions of Finnish vanlifer's own lifestyles but was brought up with the definition of the term could signify that although it has become a less relatable element of the lifestyle over time, or the lifestyle has become more accepted and therefore less countercultural. One theme common in literature but missing from the findings of this study is the existence of a "distinct subculture" within vanlife (Rizvi, 2021). This could be because vanlife is still an emerging trend within Finns and a subculture has yet to properly form.

In terms of the definition of vanlife, literature rarely brought up connotations of the term, as discussed at length in this study. Similarly to the descriptions participants provided in this study, literature contained connotations of freedom, and travel (correlated to themes 1 & 3) (Lindfelt, 2021; May, 2022; Gretzel and Hardy, 2019). Literature presumably lacks broad discussions of connotations when defining vanlife as the basic description and form of the lifestyle remain debated. The connotations for vanlife which arose from this study are more often discussed in literature when discussing the more complex ideas of motivations or identity related to vanlife. However, it seems the term vanlife is already complex in itself as a result of these findings even without going into deeper topics.

This debate on vanlife's form from the literature was also similarly present in the findings of this study. Those conflicts included themes such as the duration & intensity of vanlife and type of vehicle & construction (Myllykoski, 2023; Lindfelt, 2021; Wichtmann et al). Literature nor the findings of this study could come to a clear conclusion on who falls under the term vanlife (ibid).

Literature was missing the conflict within the term vanlife, in addition to the negativity involved in the concept despite these factors' strong presence in the findings of this study. Many participants disagreed with elements of the term and hence struggled relating to it despite their lifestyle otherwise matching the description of vanlife they provided. These conflict elements included identity & lifestyle alignment, the modern perception of vanlife not reflecting reality, commercialization, and convenience to use the term. Although not discussed as a conflict, literature frequently cited vanlife's strong connection to social media as a core driver in its development (Rizvi, 2021; Gretzel and Hardy, 2019; May, 2022). Both literature and the findings of this study agreed that vanlife is largely a social media term (ibid). Additionally, literature focused on Finland confirmed the trend's growth in recent years (Pakkala, 2023; Aittamaa, 2022). Participants of this study indicated social media and the recent growth of vanlife to be a central cause for many of the themes above. Literature lacked this discussion, possibly because of recent pushback against the growth as well as emerging negative implications of the trend.

In terms of vanlife's relation to nomadism, results as well as literature did not come to any consensus. The vast majority of research agreed that vanlife is a nomadic lifestyle, yet its

connection to digital nomadism itself is more unclear (Wichtmann et al., 2022; Pietsch, 2021). Findings of this study only agreed that they are types of lifestyles which are connected due to having the related themes of freedom and travel.

As compared to vanlife, nomadism's definitions were more consistent throughout literature and findings, throughout the themes discussed. Findings of this study found the core themes of nomadism to be freedom and autonomy (1), global citizenship and travel (2), independence/location independence (3), and flexible, remote, project-based work (4). Literature on nomadism agreed, discussing all the above themes at length except the idea of global citizenship (Mouratidis, 2018 Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017 Aittamaa, 2022). The reason for this discrepancy is unclear but could be due to the commonness of the "global citizenship" term in Finnish as compared to English.

This research on terminology found that vanlife is not as developed or understood of a term as nomadism is. Consequently, due to vanlife's huge growth in recent years, the term and the members living the lifestyle are experiencing negative impacts, the result of which may decide the fate of the term. Terminology will never be perfect, as lifestyles and the individuals living them are complex and varied. Terms are simplifications created for understanding and connection with others. In the end, the best terminology would encompass and describe within it the five themes which individuals from this study found to be the most important in their own lifestyles: freedom and autonomy (1), constant change and adaptability (2), travel, exploration, and adventures (3), simplicity and minimalism (4), and a connection to nature (5). A simple term would have difficulty communicating all the facets of what connects the participants of this study. The existing terms of vanlife and nomadism encompass most of these themes, yet mean different things to different people, making communication and true understanding difficult. This research into terminology illustrates the difficulty in using terminology to understand and connect growing alternative lifestyle groups.

5.2 Motivation

5.2.1 Motivation Findings and Previous Research

The motivations of individuals towards vanlife allow us to see both what they are hoping to achieve through the lifestyle, as well as what keeps them living the lifestyle. For the participants of this study, core motivations for entering vanlife included a dissatisfaction with one's previous lifestyle (1), mobility (2), travel (3), escaping Finnish winter (4), financial savings (5), ownership/minimalism (6), and gaining freedom (7). The findings indicate that these motivations were met by participants practicing vanlife. Furthermore, the study found that vanlife causes new motivations to form over time, including self-discovery and personal growth (8), new experiences and cultural immersion (9), a new concept of home (10), improved social connections (11), and a closer connection to nature (12).

When comparing these findings to that of broader vanlife research, motivations connected to the lifestyle are largely similar. Common motivations throughout research on vanlife include escaping everyday life (connects to theme 1), gaining independence from society or related pressures (connects to themes 1 & 8), mobility alongside or as a result of work modalities (2), better use of time for personal priorities (2 & 7), travel (3), desire for adventure (3), financial savings (5), simplicity of life and consuming less (6), motivations of pursuing freedom of different kinds (7), the ability to design one's own life (7), new experiences (9), diversion from the traditional home (10 & 2), connectedness to nature (12) (May, 2022; Wichtmann et al., 2022; Fiedler, 2022; DiGiorno, 2020; Wegerer, 2021; Dorn, 2015; Rizvi, 2021; Gretzel and Hardy, 2019; Alsenmyr, 2021). As portrayed through the numbering system above, all of these motivations have a direct correlation to the themes found in this study. Naturally, the only motivation found in this study absent from those or broader vanlife studies is escaping Finnish winter (4), as broad research fails to account for individual differences between vanlifers' countries of origin. The theme of self-discovery and personal growth (8) was also largely absent from previous research, possibly due to their broad and personal nature. Additionally, although separate themes for the purposes of this research, mobility in terms of hobbies and social connections (2 & 11) were explicitly

missing from broader research. However, these specific themes could potentially fall under the broader themes of mobility, designing one's own life, or prioritization of one's time.

On the other hand, when comparing this study's findings to that of other Finnish research on vanlife motivation, more similarities arose. Frequently cited motivations included financial savings (especially due to high living costs in Finland) (connects to theme 5), a desire to be close to nature (12), the ability to explore new places (3 & 9), gain an understanding of the world (3 & 9), escape routines and everyday life (1), a longing for freedom (7), an integration of a mobile lifestyle with homely living (10 & 2), self-exploration and assessment (8), and the ability to build a life for themselves which suits their priorities (7) (Lindfelt, 2021; Aittamaa, 2022). Escaping Finnish winters (4) was not mentioned in previous studies despite its strong prevalence in this study. Additionally, ownership/minimalism and social connections were absent from these studies. These discrepancies are potentially due to the small sample size in the two studies available. However, all other mentioned themes matched even more clearly than those of the broader vanlife research to the themes in this research. This correlates cxdde6, as specific wordings in Finnish and a similar geographic and cultural background links other Finnish studies to this research.

Based on previous research, vanlife is often cited to be connected to modern forms of nomadism, i.e., digital nomadism (Gretzel and Hardy, 2019). Based on the findings of this study, 65% of participants related to the concept of nomadism (as compared to a close 70% for vanlife). Consequently, it is valuable to consider the relationship between the motivations of this study's participants not only to vanlife motivation research, but also that of digital nomadism. Within broad digital nomadism research, key motivations include gaining access to a sense of freedom in various aspects of life (connects to theme 7), "independence from societal constraints" or expectations (1 & 8), a better work-life balance and escaping from traditional work life (1), the opportunity to travel (3), experience new cultures (9), and cost savings (5) (Fiedler, 2022; Hall, G. et al., 2018; Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017; Mouratidis, 2018). Finnish research lacks mention of work-life balance, citing the already existing balance generally found in Finnish society. All other motivations were shared by Finnish digital nomads according to research by Mathlouthi (2021). Additionally, escaping the darkness and cold of Finland's winters (4)

was included as a motivation for Finnish digital nomads, much like the vanlifers interviewed in this study, making it a unique motivation for Finnish individuals seeking alternative lifestyles (ibid). As modern nomadism is often practiced without a physical home like a vehicle in the case of vanlife, mobility (2), ownership/minimalism (6), and a new concept of home (10) were absent from nomadism motivation research. Overall, research on motivations of nomads both worldwide and in Finland largely agree with the motivations described for the Finnish vanlifers in this study.

Despite the broad spectrum of motivations, the various similarities in motivations of both vanlife and nomadism participants describe a clear overlap between the two lifestyles also in the case of Finnish individuals. Therefore, both the concepts of vanlife and nomadism provide a lifestyle choice to fulfil many of the motivations described by the participants of this study, hence explaining the similar frequency in the relation of participants to both terms.

5.2.2 Motivation Findings and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Motivation theory gives this research a base to analyze the motivations driving Finnish individuals to vanlife and to begin to explain the popularity of the trend in the Finnish environment. Firstly, according to theory, the motivations discovered in this research all can be described as motivations, as they all fall under definitions outlined by Maslow (1943) and Prabawa and Pertiwi (2020). Together, these definitions describe motivations to be created by various needs, desires, and conditions, which guide the behavior of people to actions expected to satisfy them (ibid). The motivations described in the findings of this study are all either needs, desires, or conditions which led them to seek satisfaction through vanlife.

The first motivational theory which this study cites is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which states that people have different levels of needs, and they are motivated by the desire to satisfy those needs (Maslow, 1943). When comparing the findings of this study on vanlife motivation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the themes which arose largely fall under the highest, self-actualization level of the hierarchy. These themes include a dissatisfaction with one's previous lifestyle (1), mobility (2), travel (3), ownership/minimalism (6),

gaining freedom (7), self-discovery and personal growth (8), new experiences and cultural immersion (9), and a closer connection to nature (12). Each of these themes describes a desire to gain new perspectives, understand and express oneself, achieve personal growth or fulfillment, gain a sense of harmony and interconnectedness, and an overall pursuit of one's potential. Each of these desires is closely tied to the self-actualization stage of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). These results agree with Aittamaa's (2022) previous research on vanlife motivation among Finns, citing that the desire to travel and learn about oneself and the world are strongly associated with needs of self-actualization. These results further confirm vanlife satisfies self-actualization needs for its Finnish participants.

However, not all motivational themes found in this study were described under self-actualization, unlike previous research into Finnish vanlife motivation by Aittamaa (2022). Themes arose which fall under the third and fourth highest levels of Maslow's hierarchy, love and belonging, and safety. Themes of a new concept of home (10) as well as improved social connections (11) fall under the love and belonging stage. These themes reflect participant's desire to foster meaningful relationships and connections, as well as create a sense of belonging in their emotional and physical lives. The sense of home participants found in their vehicles reflects a sense of attachment, security, and identity associated with the mobile home. This indicates that the vehicle has become a meaningful and integral part of their lives, fulfilling their need for a sense of belonging and connection and hence motivating them to continue with the lifestyle. On the other hand, themes of escaping Finnish winter (4) and financial savings (5) reflect a desire for comfort, safety, security, and stability, which fall under the fourth highest level of the hierarchy, safety. This illustrates that vanlife enabled some individuals to fulfill even the more basic of needs better than with a more traditional lifestyle in Finland.

The types of needs which vanlife satisfies for Finnish individuals provide us with more insight into the broader reasons for the lifestyle change and its continuation. This research highlights how vanlife can address a range of needs beyond self-actualization, making it a compelling lifestyle choice for many Finns. In conclusion, the motivations driving Finnish individuals to embrace vanlife reflect a complex interplay of needs, desires, and conditions, with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs providing a useful framework for

understanding the diverse array of factors contributing to the popularity of alternative lifestyle trends like this one.

5.2.3 Motivation Findings and Self-Determination Theory

Although outliers were discovered, the majority of Finnish vanlifers' motivations fall under the self-actualization level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Both Maslow (1943) and Martela (2020b) agree that the fulfillment of fundamental psychological needs addresses the need of self-actualization. As stated in *2.2 Motivation Theory*, Martela's (2020b) theory of Self-Determination (SDT) broadens the self-actualization stage into three "innate psychological needs that significantly impact human...well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness." Based on SDT, the fulfillment of these three needs can result in greater well-being, intrinsic motivation, meaningfulness in life, among other benefits (Martela, 2020a and Martela, 2020b). These three needs outline a structure to further analyze the self-actualization -based needs addressed above and assist in understanding the benefits vanlife can garner.

In terms of autonomy, Martela (2020b) describes it as a "sense of volition," where an individual feels they are the author of their own life and can endorse their own actions without feeling as they are "forced to do things." Described clearly under the theme freedom (7), especially with the frequent mention of being able to design one's own life, autonomy plays a central role in motivating individuals to enter and remain in the vanlife lifestyle. Additionally, the theme of a dissatisfaction with one's previous lifestyle connects to this theory, with participants sharing the feeling of being forced to do things, especially regarding work. Based on this analysis, the need of autonomy is fulfilled and therefore should entail in a greater well-being among other benefits described above.

The second element, competence, signifies the sense of fulfilment we get from learning and getting better at something and the "sense of mastery of being at the top of our game and getting things done" (Martela 2020b). Based on the findings of this study, individuals proudly described the fulfilment of their motivations after learning how to live the lifestyle in a way which worked for them. Additionally, similar sentiments were present in the themes of self-discovery and personal growth (8), financial savings (5),

ownership/minimalism (6), as well as a new concept of home (10). Within these themes, participants expressed growth, learning, and mastery, and were overall proud of their ability to make vanlife work for them and realize the fruits of their labour. These themes illustrate a sense of competence regarding vanlife, which enables participants to go after their other desires. This analysis agreed that the need of competence is fulfilled through vanlife for the participants of this study and therefore should provide benefits such as an improved well-being.

Finally, relatedness is about “having deep, mutually caring relationships in one’s life” (Martela 2020b). After entering vanlife, participants of this study found that the lifestyle, due to its mobility, improved social connections due to the ease at which one can visit friends and family. However, despite connections to other vanlifers through social media, a broader sense of community was missing, motivating many individuals to further create it among Finnish vanlifers. Based on responses, a stronger feeling of community and relatedness is desired among Finnish vanlifers to further fulfil their motivation to stay in the lifestyle. The relatedness need, although somewhat met, seems to be lacking, potentially impacting the well-being, intrinsic motivation, and meaningfulness Finnish vanlifers experience.

The results of this study indicate that the vanlife lifestyle fulfils the psychological needs of autonomy and competence for Finnish individuals but lacks in fulfilling the relatedness need. Participants seem to be eager in their efforts to improve their need of relatedness, noting their activity on social media and organizing of various meetups for the growing community. The lack of a feeling of relatedness may therefore explain the growth of Finnish vanlife on social media (i.e., with hashtags), eagerness of participants to foster a community, and the various events Finnish vanlifers organize for the community. These findings indicate a connection to SDT’s needs and confirm it to be true in the case of Finnish vanlifers. However, vanlife appears to contain a unique form of motivation, as participants both live and enter the lifestyle without a clear perception of their needs being met, signalling a potential lack of well-being in the lifestyle. This could be a result of the deep dissatisfaction participants felt in their previous lifestyles, resulting in a lifestyle change without a full knowledge of its impact on their whole well-being. While naturally

some elements of the vanlife lifestyle led participants to be motivated to enter it, some were unknown, such as the aspect of community, or relatedness.

As a final note, SDT cites that a “chronic frustration of these needs [of autonomy, competence, and relatedness] has been shown to hurt our motivation.” Based on responses under the theme of a dissatisfaction with one’s previous lifestyle (1), this kind of chronic frustration seems present for the participants of this study. SDT then explains that this kind of frustration often leads to “deviance, depression, and other psychological ill-adjustments.” Prior to vanlife, psychological issues were present among respondents due to their previous lifestyles, however, each participant decided on vanlife to combat this chronic frustration of needs. Therefore, vanlife can be seen through the lens of this theory as a form of deviance, or “departing of usual accepted standards and social behaviour.” With vanlife reportedly satisfying the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness better than their previous lifestyles, SDT also argues that this satisfaction “plays a crucial role in the development and sustainability of motivation,” explaining why Finnish vanlifers largely chose to continue to live the lifestyle without an end date. Overall, vanlife offers Finnish vanlifers a lifestyle which enables greater well-being, which explains their loyalty to the lifestyle.

Overall, SDT sheds light on how participants' chronic frustration with their previous lifestyles led them to choose vanlife as a means of deviance to address these needs. The application of SDT to the motivations of Finnish vanlifers reveals a strong alignment between the lifestyle and the theory's core concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Vanlife appears to fulfil the needs for autonomy and competence, as evidenced by participants' descriptions of designing their own lives and mastering the lifestyle's challenges. However, there is a perceived lack of relatedness, indicating a potential area for improvement in the vanlife community. Despite this, the study confirms that vanlife offers a lifestyle that enhances well-being, offering further insights into why Finnish vanlifers are motivated to continue living the lifestyle indefinitely.

5.3 Identity

Research into the identities of individuals participating in vanlife not only allows us to comprehend what types of individuals generally are involved, but also what their identities can tell us about the lifestyle and vice versa. This study found participants to have broad and diverse identities and differing methods of participating in vanlife. However, various similarities were identified. For the participants of this study, a strong link between identity and vanlife was discovered. The main identity themes which linked individuals to vanlife included vanlife as a part of identity (1), embracing the unknown (2), a strong sense of self (3), restlessness (4), a relation to nature (5), and a desire for freedom (6). At the core of these aspects of identity is a prioritization of personal fulfillment, especially through leveraging the benefits of the vanlife lifestyle. These benefits align with Finnish vanlifers' personal identities described in the themes above, or vice versa. For example, vanlife's attributes of simplicity and mobility combat restlessness, enable access to nature or the unknown, and incite feelings of freedom. Vanlife as an alternative lifestyle choice, on the other hand, connects the lifestyle to a strong sense of self and independence, and therefore often strengthens the personal connection with the lifestyle.

Study participants also related with Finnish identity, from which they mentioned various elements connected to vanlife. According to the study, Finnish identity uniquely shapes the vanlife experience through shyness (1), an appreciation for peace and personal space (2), "mökki" or cabin culture (3), nature (4), and "sisu," a kind of Finnish perseverance (5). The innate shyness prevalent among Finns poses challenges to community-building within the vanlife culture, while a deep-seated appreciation for peace, personal space, and nature informs travel decisions and explains how vanlife is often enjoyed. The theme of Finnish "mökki" influences not only lifestyle preferences but also the design and aesthetics of vans. The connected theme of nature explains how Finnish vanlifers prioritize and deeply value their relationship with the natural environment, hence instilling in them a sense of responsibility to protect and preserve nature through their lifestyle. Furthermore, the history behind and concept of "sisu" introduces resilience, resourcefulness, and self-sufficiency, contributing to the satisfaction and contentment derived from overcoming challenges in vanlife. Ultimately, these findings highlight the nuanced connections

between Finnish identity and the vanlife phenomenon, describing how the lifestyle is unique to the Finns who participate.

This section will further analyze these elements of personal and national identity describing Finnish vanlifers through the lenses of previous research on vanlife and nomadism identity. Additionally, these themes will be connected to Identity-Based Motivation and Social Identity Theories.

5.3.1 Personal Identity Findings and Previous Research

Previous research on vanlife sparsely discusses the impact of identity. Similarities to the findings of this study are found especially in research by Fiedler (2022) and Wichtmann et al. (2022). These studies found that vanlife itself is an element of participants' identities, much like theme (1) of this study on personal identity (ibid). Additionally, Fiedler (2022) argues that Maslow's Hierarchical stage of "self-actualization," (which largely describes vanlife in various studies including this one, see section 5.2.2 *Motivation Findings and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*), enables and motivates vanlife's participants to more freely "negotiate" their identities. In other words, vanlife offers a method for individuals to explore their identities and use vanlife as a "vehicle" to express the identity elements they desire more freely. These identity elements could be described as personal identity themes connected to vanlife, as found in this study. Similarly, Fiedler (2022) describes how vanlife enables individuals to "express their close relationship with nature" as a part of identity. Not only is a relation to nature a part of this study's findings in personal (theme 5) and Finnish (theme 4) identities connected to vanlife, but this statement also agrees with the idea that vanlife itself is the enabler of this identity performance and expression. Previous research connects to another identity element connected to the findings of this study which vanlife enables to express. Similar to the themes of embracing the unknown (2) and a strong sense of self (3) in personal identity, May (2022) describes the themes of travel, understanding of new cultures and places, and resulting self-development. Aittamaa (2022) adds the element of independence based on research of Finnish vanlifers. These identity elements are cited as central to the identity expression and construction through means of vanlife, much like in this study. Based on these similarities, this study confirms the

existing research on the connection between personal identity and vanlife and augments these themes specifically for Finnish vanlifers.

Due to limited studies on vanlife and identity, this study expanded the review of literature to digital nomadism and identity. Similar to the above findings and previous studies with the term vanlife, the term “digital nomad” has proven important in participants’ descriptions of their personal identities, this term meaning long-term travel while working (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017; Mouratidis, 2018). As discussed in *5.2.1 Motivation Findings and Previous Research*, the motivations of digital nomads and those of vanlifers have significant overlap. Identity, however, seems to diverge due to vast differences in the modes of travel and communities each lifestyle includes.

Overall, this study contributes to the limited literature on vanlife and identity by highlighting the centrality of identity elements within the vanlife experience among Finnish participants. Drawing parallels with previous research, this study confirms that vanlife itself is an identity-descriptor for participants in the lifestyle, and that it serves as a platform for individuals to explore and negotiate their identities, i.e., towards the themes of this study. Moreover, by expanding discussions to digital nomadism, the connection of identity to the term describing the lifestyle is even more prominent. Despite the limited research on vanlife and identity, this study enhances our understanding of the complex interplay between lifestyle choices and personal identity construction. This research enables us to understand how alternative lifestyle choices become such a core aspect of identity for many of their participants, impacting not only the individuals in striving to connect with the lifestyle they have chosen, but also broadening the perceptions of the lifestyles themselves.

5.3.2 Finnish Identity Findings and Previous Research

Although vanlife research in Finland exists, research specifically on the connection of Finnish identity to vanlife is limited to this study. Hence, each theme found to connect Finnish identity to vanlife has no direct confirming nor contrasting literature. This section will more broadly detail previous research on vanlife communities and shared identities to provide broad discussion on these findings.

When discussing community, this study found that while the Finnish vanlife community is emerging, the overall feeling of community is lacking. Finnish research agrees, pointing out the small number of participants and large geographic distances between members (Aittamaa, 2022). However, in both this study and limited previous research on Finnish vanlife by Aittamaa (2022), social media was shown to alleviate these needs for community and ease the building of vanlife connections among Finns. The Finnish vanlife community therefore can be described more as an “imagined tribe,” like that which Gretzel and Hardy (2019) describe, connecting over social media more than in real life. The only theme which arose in previous research regarding Finnish identity and vanlife was the element of shyness (1). Aittamaa’s research found that “Finnish vanlifers get to know each other more easily” than those of other nationalities. Although other factors might be at play here, this could point to an aspect of shyness to reach out to other vanlifers with less common ground to initiate contact with.

In terms of shared identity, vanlife often invites individuals with shared values, enabling participants to create connections like those described above and feel a sense of belonging through the lifestyle (Bergstrom, 2019). These shared ideals give the potential in creating a shared identity among vanlifers. When assessing digital nomadism, a much stronger appeal for forming a community identity around the term is apparent, some even comparing the identity which is sought to that of a national one (Mouratidis, 2018). In comparison to the findings of this study, there was an appeal to foster community within Finnish vanlifers. However, participants did not seek to forge a shared identity, despite various overlapping elements in participants’ personal identities. Rather, findings point to a wide diversity within the Finnish vanlifers, which participants sought to celebrate. Previous research also describes this diversity within vanlife, with Wilson and Hannam (2022) describing that vanlife has developed its “own subculture” among the otherwise diverse group of participants. Finnish research agrees with the diversity aspect; however, indications of a true subculture are missing from both this study and limited previous research on Finnish vanlife (Aittamaa, 2022). Naturally, over time, a clearer subculture or even shared identity might emerge among Finnish vanlifers, especially due to an already existing overlap of lifestyles and various themes discussed throughout this research among participants. However, no clear desire for a shared identity was found through research.

This study fills a gap in research by exploring the connection between Finnish identity and vanlife. While previous studies acknowledge challenges in forming community among Finnish vanlifers, this research highlights the specific aspects of Finnish identity and Finnishness tied to how vanlife is motivated and experienced among Finns. While a clearer shared identity or subculture may emerge over time like that of other vanlife communities of digital nomadism, the current status of vanlife in Finland reflects the diversity such an alternative lifestyle can accommodate.

5.3.3 Personal Identity Findings and Identity-based Motivation Theory

By exploring how identity and motivation are connected, we can further understand how these concepts jointly affect vanlife among Finns. Oyserman's (2015) Identity-based Motivation Theory suggests that neither identities nor motivations are stable; but rather that the self significantly impacts identity, this identity results in motivations, and the results of these motivations (i.e., joining vanlife) returns to impact identity. Identity is therefore both influenced by situations and a determinant of behavior within those situations. As previously discussed, motivations within this study resulted in vanlife for all participants. Congruently to this theory, participants consistently agreed that vanlife has not just become their lifestyle, but a core part of their identity, even strengthening it (connects to theme 1). Oyserman's (2015) theory adds that individuals perceive situations and challenges in alignment with their identities and favor actions that match these identities ("identity-congruent actions"). When actions align with one's identity, difficulties encountered are seen as indicators of the action's importance and significance. Conversely, if actions do not align with one's identity, the same difficulties are perceived as signs that the behavior is irrelevant and unsuitable for them ("identity-incongruent actions"). Connecting to this study, Finnish vanlifers found their previous lifestyles to be identity-incongruent due to the sentiments of a dissatisfaction with the previous lifestyle, as discussed in *5.2.1 Motivation Findings and Previous Research*. Thereafter, they found identity-congruent or confirming actions which followed in entering vanlife. As a result, vanlife became a part of their personal identities and participants found new motivations to continue the lifestyle (*4.2.2 Motivations to Continue Vanlife*).

Other elements of identity found in this study include embracing the unknown (2), a strong sense of self (3), restlessness (4), a relationship with nature (5), and a desire for freedom (6). Participants described these themes as elements of their identities which have a direct connection to how they live their vanlife lifestyles. Each aspect of identity either impacts the way participants live vanlife, vanlife impacts that aspect of identity, or are reasons why participants entered vanlife in the first place. These personal identity themes can be described as either additional initial identities resulting from the self, or identities resulting from living vanlife (the result of identity-congruent actions). Findings on aspects of Finnish identity related to vanlife can also be connected to this logic, however national identity plays a more complex role (this discussion can be found below in *5.3.4 Finnish Identity Findings and Social Identity Theory*). Research was not conducted to determine whether these identities were present pre- or post- transition to vanlife. Finally, considering that 100% of participants agreed that vanlife suits their identities better than any previous lifestyle, vanlife itself is therefore also an identity-congruent action based on this study. According to Identity-based Motivation Theory, these types of actions are important and meaningful. This agrees with the findings of this study, as participants found that their lifestyles bring them fulfillment and immense personal significance.

In summary, Oyserman's (2015) Identity-based Motivation Theory provides a tool through which to understand the complex relationship between identity and motivation in the context of Finnish vanlife. The findings of this study align with this theory, demonstrating how the chain reaction of identity and motivation resulted in a new identity-congruent element of vanlife. This study illustrates how alternative lifestyles like vanlife have the potential to enable individuals to reach higher well-being through the freedom to fulfill personal identities and motivations.

5.3.4 Finnish Identity Findings and Social Identity Theory

As the findings on how Finnish identity relates to vanlife are unique to this study, it is necessary to relate these findings to broader theory in order to further understand them. Social Identity Theory argues that humans often categorize themselves into groups "based on shared characteristics" and that social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on these group memberships (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Bergstrom, 2019). Similarly to the

interplay with identity and motivation described within Identity-based Motivation Theory above, Social Identity Theory states that within group or social identity, identity impacts group choice, but the chosen group also impacts one's identity. Therefore, identifying with both vanlife and Finnishness enables this interplay between the individual and these group identities. However, the friction which individuals in this study expressed with the Finnish identity must not be disregarded. Fiedler (2022) describes how a lifestyle change could also indicate a change in group identity. This could give reason for the friction towards Finnish group identity among participants.

As compared to social identity, national identity tends to stay more constant and connects individuals with ties to a certain place (Fiedler, 2022). The participants in this study are connected through their links to Finland and relationship with the national identity, although faintly in some cases. Among individuals with ties to the same location, this national identity has strong potential to shape identities, which previously were found to influence motivation. Therefore, national identity can also impact motivation and actions, such as entering vanlife.

Connecting back to the elements of Finnish identity found to be related to vanlife (shyness (1), an appreciation for peace and personal space (2), "mökki" or cabin culture (3), nature (4), and "sisu," a kind of Finnish perseverance (5)), participants of this study agreed these themes not only shape the experience of vanlife for them, but also unite Finnish vanlifers. Participants noted being able to connect with and more easily understand vanlifers with these elements of Finnish identity tied to their way of living the lifestyle. A similar (Finnish) mindset towards the lifestyle enabled this unity. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), belonging to such social identity groups like that of Finnishness brings various benefits to its participants, such as "a sense of belonging, purpose, self-worth, and identity."

Although Finnish vanlifers lack a prominent group identity or community according to this research, Finnishness brings vanlifers together. Participants benefit from the ability to find a sense of belonging and unity with their vanlife experiences with others who share a similar national identity, and hence have similar experiences related to the lifestyle as a result. These similar experiences include stories of "sisu" (5), or travel preferences to

peaceful locations (2), among other themes. Finnish vanlifers also reported connecting with others through their common objective of living vanlife sustainably and valuing nature (4), which is strongly connected to Finnish identity according to this research. Based on these study results, Tajfel and Turner's (1979) benefits of a sense of belonging and purpose come to fruition for participants as a result of their Finnish group identity, improving overall well-being. In terms of the benefit of self-worth, Tajfel and Turner (1979) specify that group identity may improve one's self-worth if the group has a positive image or accomplishes something great. Additional benefits for Finnish vanlifers might be lacking in this area, as research suggests that the Finnish vanlife community is not developed enough to outline any significant group accomplishments or have an overall group image. Finally, through Finnish vanlifers' national identity, personal identity can be better understood. Through relating their identities to Finnish identity, participants are able to better understand themselves and how their participation in vanlife is uniquely shaped by Finnishness. Participants agreed that all five themes detailed above connect not only to Finnish identity, but also their personal identities. Clearly seen among Finnish vanlifers, this benefit of a stronger identity is important because it fosters a deeper sense of self-awareness and personal cultural connection. These factors enrich participants' vanlife experiences through a context-specific understanding of their lifestyle.

According to the findings of this study, although vanlife experiences are unique among Finns, similarities in experiences and motivations arise from the shared national identity. These similarities are expressed in the themes strongly tied to Finnish identity, connecting the group further. Moreover, based on theory, the identification with the Finnish social group brings the benefits of belonging, purpose, and identity to participants, helping them reach fulfilled lives through the mode of vanlife.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this study on vanlife perception, motivation, and identity among Finns, one thing is constant; vanlife is multifaceted. There are no two identical ways of living vanlife, especially in a small community like that of Finnish vanlifers. Vanlife can be understood

and motivated uniquely. Once living the lifestyle, new motivations can arise. Identity impacts and motivates vanlife, and vice versa. What connects Finnish vanlifers at the core, is the desire for freedom, and more broadly to embark on a lifestyle journey in hopes of self-determining the kind of life they live. Vanlife is not the mold for this determination, but rather the literal and figurative "vehicle" for creating one's own unique life as their motivations and identities desire.

So, in the end, it is no wonder why:

“Kaikki muut vaihtoehdot vaikuttaa huonommilta kun autossa asuminen.” (FIN)

“All other options seem worse than living in a car.” (ENG)

When it is the individual themselves who has had the courage to create the life they want to live, vanlife just so happens to be a way to get there.

6.1 Research summary

This study aimed to understand the interrelations of vanlife's current perception, related motivations, and influencing identities for the lifestyle's Finnish participants. This section is a review of the key findings and implications found to best understand these facets of the lifestyle.

6.1.1 Perception of the Lifestyle and Terminology

This study reveals that Finnish vanlifers perceive their lifestyle positively, emphasizing themes of freedom and autonomy, constant change and adaptability, travel, exploration, and adventures, simplicity and minimalism, and connection to nature. These findings suggest an overall satisfaction with the vanlife lifestyle among its Finnish participants and provide a valuable understanding of the status and form of this lifestyle for this subgroup.

As 70% of participants related with the term, “vanlife” encompasses similar themes to how Finnish participants describe their own lifestyles. However, the term harbors negative

connotations mainly due to commercialization and social media stereotypes. Additionally, although findings point to vanlife as an inclusive lifestyle, debates exist over what qualifies as vanlife (e.g., vehicle type, duration, and intensity of lifestyle). In contrast, the term “nomadism,” related to by 65% of participants, is viewed more positively. Nomadism is broadly associated with location-independent life and work, frequent travel, freedom, and independence by the participants of this study. These understandings of terms point to potential frictions in the emerging scene of vanlife in Finland, yet a more stable and desired status is apparent for nomadism.

The varied terminology used to describe these lifestyles indicates a nuanced and individualized understanding among Finns, but findings suggest friction in the use of terminology overall to describe one’s lifestyle. While terminology helps in identifying and discussing these lifestyles, it can also create misconceptions and constrict personal identity. The diverse and evolving interpretations of the terminology highlight the complexity and individualism within their respective communities. Overall, these findings provide a valuable understanding of the status and form of this lifestyle for this subgroup of the overall lifestyle.

6.1.2 Motivations to Enter and Continue Vanlife

Finnish vanlifers were largely motivated to enter vanlife through similar factors despite otherwise unique stories. These common themes include dissatisfaction with one’s previous lifestyle, mobility, travel, escaping Finnish winter, financial savings, ownership/minimalism, and gaining freedom. Findings show that these motivations to enter the vanlife were fulfilled through the lifestyle. Upon living vanlife, this study found five new motivations for continuing the lifestyle. Motivations of self-discovery and personal growth, new experiences and cultures, a new concept of home, improved social connections, and connection to nature were common among Finnish vanlifers.

This study provides insight into the minds of Finns when considering a lifestyle shift and indicated that the motivations described by participants to enter and continue vanlife are achievable through the lifestyle. These findings highlight vanlife's potential to provide a fulfilling and meaningful way of life for individuals with various kinds of motivations.

6.1.3 Personal and Finnish Identity

Findings on the personal identities of Finnish vanlifers were immensely varied, confirming the described diversity of the community and illustrating the lifestyle's compatibility with various kinds of people. Despite the diversity in identities, the connection between identity and vanlife remained clear. This study found that identity and vanlife connect through themes of: vanlife as a part of identity, embracing the unknown, a strong sense of self, restlessness, a relationship with nature, and a desire for freedom.

In terms of Finnish identity connected to vanlife, findings describe five key features, including: shyness (1), an appreciation for peace and personal space (2), "mökki" or cabin culture (3), nature (4), and "sisu," a kind of Finnish perseverance (5). The innate shyness prevalent among Finns poses challenges to community-building within the vanlife culture, while a deep-seated appreciation for peace, personal space, and nature informs travel decisions and explains how vanlife is often enjoyed. Next, the theme of Finnish "mökki" influences not only lifestyle preferences but also the design and aesthetics of vans. The connected theme of nature explains how Finnish vanlifers prioritize and deeply value their relationship with the natural environment, hence instilling in them a sense of responsibility to protect and preserve nature through their lifestyle. Furthermore, the history behind and concept of "sisu" instills resilience, resourcefulness, and self-sufficiency, contributing to the satisfaction and contentment derived from overcoming challenges in vanlife. Ultimately, these findings highlight the nuanced connections between Finnish identity and the vanlife phenomenon, describing how the lifestyle is unique to the Finns who participate.

6.2 Practical implications

In addition to the theoretical implications discussed throughout this study on the research questions posed, this research provides various practical implications for a broad spectrum of groups. Uncovering why the trend has been an outlet for certain motivations and identities of individuals could provide learnings or insight for:

- a. The further development of vanlife within Finns and certain related business/government directions to benefit the growing community, i.e., services, spaces, or organized online communities.
- b. An understanding of how a lifestyle trend expands to a new subgroup gives visibility into the development of trends and aspects to focus on or avoid when fostering community from its early stages (i.e., the negative impacts of popular terminology like “vanlife” to categorize participants).
- c. How Finnish identity is uniquely suited to lifestyle trends such as vanlife, giving a preliminary understanding of how other related trends (i.e., digital nomadism) could further evolve in the Finnish environment.
- d. An understanding into the mindset switch of Finns who embark on an alternative lifestyle journey, and the needs which they found are not met through a more traditional Finnish lifestyle. These common frustrations expressed in this study with Finnish vanlifers’ previous lifestyles could provide action points for government initiatives. These pain points may be broader, and cause tension in the lives of Finnish individuals not able to pursue a lifestyle like that of vanlife and hence could be worthy for the government address.

This research into vanlife among Finns provides a nuanced understanding of the Finnish environment through the lens of this alternative lifestyle, and hence give valuable insight to stakeholders within the trend, in the government, or those with related business ventures.

6.3 Limitations of the study

This study aimed to be conducted with high quality and address all possible limitations and resulting negative impacts. In addition to the research goals, this study sought to provide a suitable base for further studies on vanlife in Finland and provide a format to compare these findings to other groups/regions. Considering this aim, it is important to acknowledge the following limitations:

In terms of the sample, this study is limited by the number of participants included (n=20) due to constraints on time and resources. Naturally, a greater number of participants would improve results, expand the study, and provide more overall accuracy. Additionally, there

may be bias within the sample, meaning that the study's findings may not be representative of the broader population of Finnish vanlifers due to the specific characteristics of the sample, i.e., demographics, socioeconomic statuses, etc. For example, included participants were largely found and contacted through social media. Hence, there may be an overrepresentation of vanlifers active on social media, possibly causing discrepancies in data. Another related limitation is the amount of time and the intensity of which participants had been involved with vanlife. The relationship between vanlife, motivation, and identity therefore has been analyzed at a specific point in time for each participant at different stages of their personal journeys, hence results may be impacted due to this variety in experience. A study with a larger scope and time would enable a longitudinal perspective into participants by tracking their evolving relationship with this study's themes over time.

In terms of the interview and specifics of the study methodology, the interview inquiry and lead up to questions may have led to self-reporting bias. This occurs when participants may provide answers which they believe are desired or align with what the researcher expects. This bias could potentially skew the results and misrepresent the true relationship of motivations, identity, and vanlife. Additionally, subjectivity of interpretation may have caused certain study limitations. For example, although relatively consistent throughout interviews, questions may be interpreted differently between participants. Responses also may be understood differently than intended by the researcher. This variety in interpretation may have caused discrepancies in data and therefore also the conclusions drawn from the study. Finally, existing language and culture barriers are included as limitations for this study. As correspondence and interviews with participants were conducted in Finnish, translations and cultural implications may not be translated or understood accordingly. As a result, meaning and depth could have been lost from responses and impacted the conclusions of this research.

Despite these limitations, this study aimed for the highest validity and reliability possible with the scope and time available for the research. However, when considering future research, these limitations provide a basis for improvement of similar or related studies.

6.4 Suggestions for further research

The above limitations provide direction for the expansion or improvement of this study specifically, as well as act as pointers to consider in other studies of similar nature. Other potential research directions directly arose from the findings of this study. Firstly, as freedom was consistently mentioned both in the literature review as well as by participants throughout the topics and themes of this study, further research could include an aim to deeply understand the concept and meaning of the term for vanlifers. Research could discuss both the meaning and strive to understand if different individuals have a different need for freedom. Additionally, research could cover the Finnish vanlife community (both online and in-person) and delve into its intricacies and growth, while comparing the evolution of vanlife communities in other geographic regions. As community among Finnish vanlifers was often mentioned as lacking by the participants of this study, research could aim to understand both the status as well as how to foster such communities of nomadic lifestyles in the Finnish environment. Related to understanding community in vanlife, studies could look into needs or business cases for certain spaces, facilities, or services to accommodate the growing group of both Finnish vanlifers and vanlifers traveling to Finland from other regions. Studies could draw inspiration from the services available to the arguably more developed digital nomad community worldwide. Lastly, the environmental impact of the growth of vanlife in different regions is a critical topic needing further research. In conclusion, as vanlife, especially among Finns, is an emerging phenomenon, any research which delves into this topic brings valuable insight to both interested individuals and academia.

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APPENDICES

I. Interview Inquiries and Questions, (Finnish and English)

Finnish:

- **Interview Inquiry** (Email, social media direct message, SMS, phone call)

Subject: Haastatelukutsu: Tutkitaan erilaisissa ajoneuvossa asuvia suomalaisia

Hei [X]!

Olen Laura Suomalainen, maisteriopiskelija Aalto-yliopistossa, ja teen parhaillaan gradua suomalaisten motiiveista elää erilaisissa ajoneuvoissa ja tämän ilmiön yhteydestä suomalaisuuteen. Sain yhteystietosi [X]:ltä, ja kokemuksesi [X]:stä sopisivat erinomaisesti tutkimukseeni.

Elän itsekin nomadina pakettiautossa, ja sen takia haluan todella ymmärtää, miten tämä ilmiö on kehittynyt suomalaisten keskuudessa. Näkemyksesi olisivat äärimmäisen arvokkaita tutkimukselleni, ja arvostaisin mahdollisuutta haastatella sinua!

Haastattelu kestäisi enintään tunnin ja voimme keskustella joko suomeksi tai englanniksi. Haastattelu onnistuu Zoomin välityksellä tai livenä jos mahdollista. Olisi mahtavaa päästä keskustelemaan ajatusmaailmastasi tämän aiheen suhteen, joten jos olet kiinnostunut, ilmoitathan minulle, niin etsitään sopiva ajankohta!

Ystävällisin terveisin,

Laura Suomalainen

Contact Information provided here.

- **Interview**

Kiitos kun osallistut haastatteluun! Ennen kuin aloitamme, suostutko siihen, että tämä haastattelu nauhoitetaan ja että jakamiasi tietoja käsitellään anonymisti tässä

tutkimuksessa? Kukaan muu kuin minä ja ohjaajani ei tule kuulemaan tai lukemaan haastattelua.

Kuten mainitsin viestissäni, olen Aalto-yliopiston maisteriopiskelija joka tutkii gradua varten suomalaisten motiiveja elää erilaisissa ajoneuvoissa ja tämän ilmiön yhteydestä suomalaisuuteen. Kiinnostukseni tähän aiheeseen johtuu siitä, että itse jaan samanlaisen elämäntavan ja haluan tietää muiden samanhenkisten ajatusmaailmoistaan aiheita kohden. Tutkimusta tästä aiheesta on suomen tasolla hyvin vähän, joten mahtavaa kun pääset olemaan osana sitä!

Tuleeko mieleen mitään kysyttävää ennen varsinaista haastattelua?

I. Perusasiat

1. Kuinka kuvailisit elämäntapaasi? (*Päivittäisestä vuosittaiseen, koti(kodit) and tarinat, työ, harrastukset, asuminen, matkustaminen, kuinka usein?*)
2. Mitä sana ”vanlife” mielestäsi tarkoittaa? Samaistutko siihen? Miten kuvailisit nomadismia? (~~Entä nykypäivänä?~~) Samaistutko siihen? Onko jotain muuta termiä tai sanastoa jota käytät tai johon samaistut elämäntyyliilläsi?
3. Kuinka kauan olet elänyt tätä elämäntapaa? Onko näkyvissä ~~päättymispäivämäärää?~~ **Muutoksia?**
4. ~~Missä kaikkialla olet matkustanut? Oletko viettänyt paljon aikaa Suomessa ajoneuvossa eläen? Minkälaista se on ollut verrattuna muihin paikkoihin?~~
Question moved below

II. Motivaatio

1. Mitkä olivat alkuperäiset motiivisi ryhtyä tähän elämäntapaan?
2. Onko todellisuus vastannut alkuperäisiä motiivejasi?
3. Oletko löytänyt uusia motiiveja elämäntavan jatkamiseksi? (**Made into separate question**)
4. (*Jos olet poistunut elämäntavasta tai harkitset sitä*) Mitkä ovat/mikä olisi motiivisi jättää tämä elämäntapa? Olitko tietoinen näistä syistä/motiiveista ennen elämäntavan aloittamista?
5. (*Jos osa-aikainen tai entinen osa-aikainen*) Miksi et jatkanut elämäntapaa / harkinnut täysipäiväistä? Mitkä tekijät vaikuttivat päätökseesi?

6. *Mikä on parasta ja mikä vaikeinta tässä elämäntavassa? Onko erityisiä haasteita tai huippuhetkiä?*

7. *Miten koet nyky-yhteiskunnan vaikuttavan tämän trendin kasvuun?*

III. Identiteetti / Suomalaisuus

1. *Miten identifioit itsesi? **Mitä kuuluu sun identiteettiin? Adjektiivejä? Miten muut kuvailisi sua?***

2. *Onko näissä motivaatioissa jokin linkki identiteettisi?*

3. *Koetko, että (nykyinen) elämäntyyli sopii paremmin identiteettisi? Miksi?*

4. *Mitä sinulle merkitsee ~~olla osana~~ elää tätä elämäntyyliä?*

5. *Onko identiteetissäsi jotain, joka voisi vaikuttaa tapaasi kokea tätä elämäntapaa (hyvällä tai huonolla tavalla)?*

6. *Missä kaikkialla olet matkustanut? Oletko viettänyt paljon aikaa Suomessa ajoneuvossa eläen? Minkälaista se on ollut verrattuna muihin paikkoihin?*

7. *Mikä on yhteytesi Suomeen? Tunnetko itsesi suomalaiseksi?*

8. *Mitä ”Suomalainen identiteetti” tarkoittaa sinulle? Mitä siihen kuuluu?*

9. *Koetko, että jotain identiteetistäsi on Suomalaista? Mitä?*

10. ~~Onko suomalaisessa identiteetissäsi jotain~~, *Koetko, että identiteetissäsi on jotain jonka voisi liittää suomessa kasvamiseen tai suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa asumiseen, joka voisi vaikuttaa tapaasi kokea tätä elämäntapaa?/motivoida siihen?*

11. *Mikä on käsityksesi tämän ilmiön nykytilanteesta suomalaisten keskuudessa? Miten kuvailisit stereotyyppistä ajoneuvossa asuvaa?*

12. *Koetko, että käsitys nomadisista elämäntavoista on muuttunut? Miksi? Miten muut ovat reagoineet elämäntapaasi?*

IV. Menetelmät

1. *Tunnetko ketään, joka sopisi tähän tutkimukseen ja voisit pyytää haastatteluun? (Stopped asking after enough participants were confirmed)*

2. *Onko jotain muuta, mitä haluat kertoa, tai jäikö jokin kysymys puuttumaan? (questions to ask others)?*

Italic – Questions that are often answered with others or optional questions to ask/prod deeper into a topic that came up.

Bold – Newly added elements, questions, or wordings

~~Strikethrough—Deleted questions, moved questions, or parts of questions removed~~

English:

- **Interview Inquiry** (Email, social media direct message, SMS, phone call)

Subject: Interview Request: Exploring In-Vehicle Lifestyles Among Finnish-Identifying Individuals

Dear [Recipient's Name],

My name is Laura Suomalainen, and I am a master's student at Aalto University, currently pursuing research for my thesis on the motivations of Finns to live in different vehicles and how this phenomenon connects to Finnish identity. I got your contact from [X] and your experiences with [X] would match my research very well.

The reason for my interest for this topic is that I have been living in a van for the past year in the Nordic region. As someone who shares this way of life, I am genuinely interested in understanding how this phenomenon is evolving among fellow Finns. Your perspectives would be invaluable to my research, and I would appreciate the opportunity to interview you.

The interview is expected to take a maximum of 1 hour and can be in either Finnish or English. We can either call via phone or Zoom, or even meet in person, if possible, whichever works best for you. Please let me know if you would be interested, and we can find a slot to chat in the coming weeks!

Kind regards,

Laura Suomalainen

Contact Information provided here.

- **Interview**

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed! Before we begin, do you consent that this interview be recorded, and the information you share to be included anonymously in this master's thesis research? No one else except myself and my supervisor will hear or read the interview.

As I stated in my message, I'm a master's student from Aalto University studying the motivations of Finns to live in different vehicles and how this phenomenon connects to Finnish identity. My interest in this topic comes from the fact that I also share this type of lifestyle and am interested in the thought process of likeminded individuals. This topic has not been extensively studied in Finland, so it is fantastic you are able to be a part of it!

Do you have any questions before we begin?

I. Basics

- ~~1. How would you describe your lifestyle? (Daily to yearly, home(s) *and stories, work, hobbies, who living with, moving/traveling/frequency*)~~
2. What does "vanlife" mean in your opinion? Do you relate with it? What is nomadism in your opinion? ~~Modern nomadism?~~ Do you relate with it? Are there any other terms that you relate to through your lifestyle?
3. How long have you been living this lifestyle? Is there ~~an end or fixed time~~ in sight? **Changes?**
- ~~4. Where all have you travelled? Have you spent lots of time in Finland? How has that been like compared to other places? Question moved below.~~

II. Motivations

1. What were your initial motivations to enter this lifestyle?
2. Once you were living the lifestyle, were those motivations fulfilled?
3. Did you uncover new ones? **(Made into separate question)**
4. *(If left lifestyle or considering) What are/would be your motivations to leave this lifestyle? Did you know of/expect these before starting?*
5. *(If part-time or ex-part-time) Why did you not continue the lifestyle/consider full-time? What push and pull factors led you to your decision?*
6. *What are the highs and lows in your opinion? Any notable challenges? Highlights?*

7. *What do you think these kinds of lifestyles are a symptom (or result) of in the greater society?*

III. Identity / Finnishness

1. *How do you identify yourself? **What is included in your identity? Adjectives? How would others describe you?***
2. *Is there some link to your identity in these motivations?*
3. *Do you feel as though your (current) identity fits your identity better? Why?*
4. *What does it mean to you to live this lifestyle?*
5. *Is there something about your identity that you think could impact your way of experiencing this lifestyle? (in a good or bad way)*
6. *Where all have you travelled? Have you spent lots of time in Finland? How has that been like compared to other places?*
7. *What is your connection to Finland? Do you identify as Finnish?*
8. *What does "Finnish identity" mean to you? What is a part of it?*
9. *Do you think that something about your identity is Finnish? What?*
10. ~~*Is there something about your Finnish identity*~~ **Do you feel that there is something within your identity that you can attribute to growing up in Finland or from living in Finnish society** *that you think could impact your way of experiencing this lifestyle or motivating you to enter it?*
11. *What is your understanding of the current status of this trend among Finns? How would you describe the stereotypical vehicle dweller?*
12. *Do you think views of nomadic lifestyles have changed? Why? How have others reacted to your way of life?*

IV. Methods

- ~~1. *Do you have any other Finns you know that would fit this research who I could ask to interview?*~~ **(Stopped asking after enough participants were confirmed)**
2. *Is there something else you would like to share or some question I am missing? (questions to ask others)*

Italic – Questions that are often answered with others, different wording options that came about, or optional questions to ask depending on situation or to/prod deeper into a topic that came up.

Bold – Changes, newly added elements, questions, or wordings

~~Strikethrough – Deleted questions, moved questions, or parts of questions removed~~