



# ‘Get rid of the unimportant so that the important can shine’: an exploration of vehicle residents’ personal collections and information practices

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** For vehicle residents—people who live in vehicles—reduction and minimalism are byproducts of living in a small space. Their physical personal collections, and practices around managing these collections, illustrate how information practices can be sustainable.

**Method.** This multi-method study used ethnographic and visual methods. Data was collected using participant observations, information horizon interviews, guided tours and photographs of participants’ immediate information spaces.

**Analysis.** For the current study, 25 guided tours and ~125 photographs of participants’ immediate information space were analysed, using abductive analysis and, additionally, visual analysis for the photographs.

**Results.** Vehicle residents highlighted aspects of reduction, minimalism, and reuse in their engagement with their personal, physical collections. We propose a model of components for sustainable information practices, including each of the three aspects: reduction, minimalism and reuse, placing physical personal collections at the centre of an ongoing (recycling) process.

**Conclusion.** By looking at vehicle residents’ physical personal collections (and the practices involved in selecting and maintaining them), this study expands previous definitions of sustainable information practices. By pointing to possible components of these practices and focusing on (more tangible) physical aspects, vehicle residents’ information practices are highlighted as an example to further explore sustainable information practices in future research.

## Introduction

Conscious and intentional decision-making is an integral part of engaging with information or personal collections sustainably. Vehicle residents—people who live in vehicles—live an information intensive lifestyle, making decisions about information to maintain their daily lives and the physical items, or collections, with which they fill their spaces (i.e., their vehicles) (Montague, 2025). This paper explores how vehicle residents curate their physical personal collections, resulting in sustainable information practices. The concept of sustainable information practices was introduced from human computer interaction (HCI), highlighting the social behaviours through which we can ‘create, change, share, and store information’ sustainably (Nathan, 2012, p. 2267). Research in sustainable HCI focuses on the longevity and design of technological systems and tools, while also focusing on how humans interact with these technologies (Laurell Thorslund & Leifler, 2025; Prost et al., 2023). Scholars in Library and Information Science (LIS) have shown an increasing interest in sustainability; although sustainability is not a nascent concept for LIS, its focus has been limited to libraries (i.e., green library buildings, sustainable development of libraries and digital services) and the environmental impact of information and communication technologies (Du, 2022; Kamińska et al., 2021).

The aim of this paper is to take sustainability into consideration in studying personal information management (PIM) and information practices without foregrounding technologies as the primary focus. Exploring vehicle residents’ PIM and information practices are particularly suitable as they include the physical aspects of their personal collections. Aside from sustainable food practices, sustainability has been understudied in information behaviour and practices research (Du, 2022; Du & Costello, 2025). Combining perspectives from information practices and PIM literature, the authors address physical aspects of sustainable information practices. Using ethnographic and visual methods, findings highlight three themes: reduction, minimalism, and reuse, creating a process model expanding sustainable information practices.

## Background

### Personal collections

Personal collections, in PIM, are defined as ‘documents and items created or collected, intentionally or accidentally, by an individual for their personal use in various life contexts, that is held and curated within their personal physical or digital space’, including intangible aspects such as values, making items meaningful beyond their functionality (Krtalić and Dinneen, 2024, p.189; Krtalić & Ihejirika, 2023). Personal collections have been studied in information behaviour as *immediate information spaces* (Hartel & Thomson, 2011). Individuals gradually create personal collections by acquiring, organising and selecting which information items to keep long term (Cushing, 2023; Krtalić & Dinneen, 2024), with behaviours varying widely between minimalism and hoarding (Vitale et al., 2018).

### Reduction

Discarding is an inevitable part of personal collection management (Krtalić et al., 2021) and the deletion within digital personal collections has received growing attention (Hellmich & Dinneen, 2025; Vitale et al., 2018), but the reduction of physical personal collections has been omitted. The availability of (physical) space affects collection size and organization, particularly in migration contexts (Krtalić & Ihejirika, 2023) and motivates decluttering (Jones & Ackerman, 2016). Smaller collections can be more inspiring, enjoyable, and easier to maintain and thus, more sustainable, compared to larger collections (Jones & Ackerman, 2016; Krtalić et al., 2021; Petrelli & Whittaker, 2010). However, discarding decisions are difficult for individuals, as they require assessing an item’s future use and value (Whittaker, 2011).

## Minimalism

Minimalism places ‘a high value on living with less’ (Pollak, 2016, p.1229) and improves emotional well-being (Hook et al., 2023). Minimalist lifestyles may be adopted for aesthetic or sustainability and environmental reasons, studied in consumer behaviour as voluntary simplicity, sustainable consumption and anti-consumerism (Muster et al., 2022; Uggla, 2019; Vlieger De Oliveira et al., 2024). Pollak (2016) distinguishes between the adoption of minimalism by choice or by chance/circumstance, highlighting social injustices and societal prejudices. Marginalised populations in particular may fall into the second category, including residents of remote rural areas with limited access to material goods and resources, leading to practices such as repurposing items (Pollak, 2016).

## Reuse

Reuse is considered a creative act or repurposing of physical materials and resources. Reuse is a fundamental principle of making, implying a direct relationship with creating and (re-)using resources (Anderson, 2012; Brahms & Crawley, 2016). Makers are resourceful, creating new things from reclaimed and reused materials (Hemmig, 2009). Their resourcefulness and innate open-mindedness allow them to use everyday, accessible materials to create innovative, functional items to meet their needs (Einarsson & Hertzum, 2021; Mace & Ward, 2002). These materials are reused thoughtfully and deliberately, becoming part of their personal collections. The aforementioned reuse practices echo Cushing’s (2023) assertion that managing personal information is a deeply intentional, caring process.

## Research questions

The following research question guided this study’s design and implementation:

*How are vehicle residents adapting information practices involving their personal, physical collections that are sustainable?*

## Methods

### Field sites

Fieldwork took place from June 2023–February 2025 in two rounds: 1) in Santa Cruz, California and 2) along the Arizona/California border. For the purposes of this paper, findings will focus on round 2 where the first author lived in their vehicle and volunteered with the National Vehicle Residency Collective, a human rights advocacy organization to attend four nomadic gathering events—the Women’s Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, Skooliepalooza, and Van Aid.

### Data collection and analysis

This multi-method ethnographic study utilised participant observation (Lareau, 2021), information horizon interviews (Sonnenwald et al., 2001), 25 guided tours of participants’ vehicles (Thomson, 2018), and ~125 photographs of participants’ immediate information spaces (Hartel & Thomson, 2011). During data collection, the first author obtained participants’ consent for the use of images and quotations in publications and presentations. Findings emphasize photographs and think-aloud transcripts of the guided tours. During the guided tour, participants led Author 1 through their vehicles, describing and explaining its features aloud (e.g., how they built different parts of the interior), while Author 1 took photographs of participants’ immediate information spaces. Transcripts were analysed using abductive analysis identifying themes and illuminating quotations (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Abductive analysis was used to conduct equal engagement with empirical data and extant theoretical understanding (Thompson, 2022), while visual and inductive analysis were used for photographs and information horizon interview maps (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Rose, 2012). Three major themes emerged through the analysis: reduction, minimalism and reuse. The following section is organised by these themes.

## Findings and discussion

### Reduction

Availability, size, and type of space are crucial in shaping vehicle residents' personal collections, making the downsizing of former possessions an essential aspect of vehicle residents' collection management. Participants carefully curate their physical, personal collections housed in their vehicles (i.e., bare necessities to survive such as sleeping space, food and water storage, kitchen equipment, clothes and gear, books, etc., see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Jim's personal collection.

Discarding is a critical practice due to the limitation of physical space. Mo explained, '*I think it just depends on your need for space*', implying a subjective experience of space. Some participants, such as Robyn, shared, '*You're looking at everything I own. Everything is in here.*' Figure 2 depicts Robyn's van, housing all of her belongings.



**Figure 2.** Robyn's home on wheels housing everything she owns.

Others, such as Bernice, discussed discarding and storing possessions due to having limited space in her van. *'I have a set of skis, snowshoes, flippers and a mask and snorkel. I mean, I really did clear out my home...I have a few boxes of stuff at my parents' house. But really, I just really wanted this to be where I lived, and it is. So, I have all of this stuff.'* In contrast, Jim emphasized the importance of simplicity while on the road:

*The key is simplicity. Simplicity. And being an ultralight backpacker, you have multiple things that do the same purpose...I've had my life before where it became chaos...I had too much stuff. It didn't bring any happiness...Get rid of the unimportant so that the important can shine. [Otherwise], it's like a picture with too many things in it.*

Reduced collection sizes are one important aspect of sustainable information collections resulting in increased emotional well-being and a sense of freedom and simplicity, echoing previous findings about the advantages of smaller collections such as easier management and greater enjoyment (Hellmich & Dinneen, 2025; Jones & Ackerman, 2016; Petrelli & Whittaker, 2010).

### Minimalism

Placing a high value on living with less, vehicle residents are minimalists by choice, chance and/or circumstance due to economic, social or geographical marginalisation. For instance, parking in the desert leads to a minimalistic lifestyle as access to resources, infrastructures, and services is limited. Many participants discussed conserving their resources during long stints in remote places. Brain explained:

*I got rid of the hot water heater because there was a leak in it. I rarely wanted to heat up five gallons of water. It uses a ton of propane and is very wasteful. Part of the reason I love my lifestyle is that it's a much lesser impact on the environment. Because I have solar, I'm not wasting things. I'm very miserly with my energy usage. And so, I don't like using resources.*

Vehicle residents are constantly making decisions about discarding possessions. Because space and minimising resources are integral aspects of vehicle residency, necessity overrides desire. *'There's things I would like to have, that I'd like to bring, but I don't. Like a kayak because I don't need*

*a kayak, but it's fun and I do love that, but you do have to make choices in this life'* Jim explained. During the guided tour, Sheila walked through the daily routines she carries out in her minivan, where every item has a purpose and designated place to accommodate all her needs (see Figure 3.). She shared:

*I transitioned to no shampoo. Less to carry. And so, I just put hot water, you know, as warm as I can take it, and it goes into this (points to bowl)... I feel like I can make such a little impact on the environment. Being humans, we do actually need few resources.*



**Figure 3.** Sheila's small space with minimal resources.

Minimalism emphasises vehicle residents' environmentally sustainable lifestyles, minimizing use of natural resources and consumption—most often at the cost of comfort—presenting an extreme example of what humans truly need. This extends research about sustainability in information practices (Du & Costello, 2024) and minimalism (Pollak, 2016). research rarely discusses the environmental sustainability of collections (Hellmich & Dinneen, 2022; Hogan, 2018).

### Reuse

Living closely with their surroundings, many participants creatively reuse and repurpose materials in their vehicles, engaging in reuse as a key aspect of their sustainable living practices. They utilise inexpensive materials to create and maintain their home spaces (see Figure 4). For instance, Laffrey explained their use of refurbished and recycled materials when building out their box truck:

*My build is, as much as possible, made out of recycled and reclaimed materials... there's only one brand new two-by-four in the entire build. I also added the door... I pulled the door out of an old UPS truck and installed it. It's one of my favourite pieces. It's all covered with wine foil, just a little bit that covers the cork. My mom had been collecting it for years... I was trying to*

*figure out what to cover it with, and she came up with the wine foil. It's just spray adhesive glued on and hammered with a ball-peen hammer. And I made a little window.*



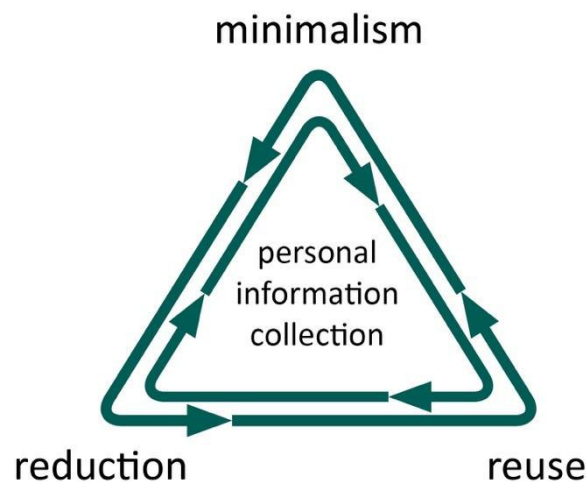
**Figure 4.** Laffrey's box truck created almost entirely of recycled materials.

Another participant, Aidan, the community librarian who runs and owns 'Lucy the Library Bus', shared how he collected and recycled old resources such as wood for his bookshelves inside of the bus. He explained, '*See these lockers? They were originally one giant locker. Like the kind from an elementary school... I liked the vibe because this is the library bus*'.

Reuse stems from the extreme reduction of possessions and the maker perspective including the recycling of materials (environmental sustainability) (Anderson, 2012; Brams & Crawley, 2016; Hemmig, 2009). Creative interactions with personal collections generate additional non-material value and can be considered an intentional creation, adding an aspect of social sustainability to vehicle residents' practices. Reuse parallels the conceptualisation of PIM as care (Cushing, 2023).

#### Sustainable information practices

Synthesizing the findings and discussion, we propose a 'recycle model of components for sustainable information practices' (see Figure 5), including the three aspects: reduction, minimalism and reuse. The model not only shows the three components as independent from each other but highlights their permeability and the interconnectedness of the practices involved. The personal, physical collections are simultaneously a starting point and result of the ongoing (recycling) process.



**Figure 5.** Recycle model of components for sustainable information practices in the personal physical collections of vehicle residents.

## Conclusion

Vehicle residents highlight aspects of reduction, minimalism, and reuse in their engagement with their personal, physical collections. Nathan (2012), focusing on digital information practices (e.g. electronic communication), sought to broaden the meaning of sustainable information practices by bringing a social perspective through information practices to sustainable HCI, which has been more concerned with the sustainability of technological devices.

Our study expands this view of sustainable information practices by pointing to possible components of these practices and focusing on their physical aspects. Choosing to look at sustainable information practices from a physical collection perspective adds a tangible layer to the discussion that can serve as a starting point for future investigations on less tangible aspects of sustainable information practices (e.g. in the digital realm). Thus, we highlight vehicle residents' practices as an example to further explore how sustainable information practices are lived and experienced in this community and others with the aim of delving deeper into this area in future research.

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